

GENE AUTRY

and the Redwood Pirates



GENE COUNTRY

and the
Redwood
Pirates

2326

WHITMAN



GENE AUTRY

and the

Redwood Pirates

By BOB HAMILTON

Gene Autry and his horse, Champ, find plenty of grave trouble brewing as soon as they get into the redwood country to investigate a rumor about a gang who is pirating timber in the forests along the Chicapoo River. It takes all of Gene's quick thinking and action, his indomitable courage and determination to bring this group of lawless men to justice.



Gene Autry has traveled far and fast since he was born in Tioga, Texas. He made his first phonograph records of cowboy songs in 1929, and since then has become a radio, movie and rodeo star of international fame. During World War II Gene was in the army. Since his discharge he has again started radio and movie work to the great pleasure and satisfaction of his millions of fans.

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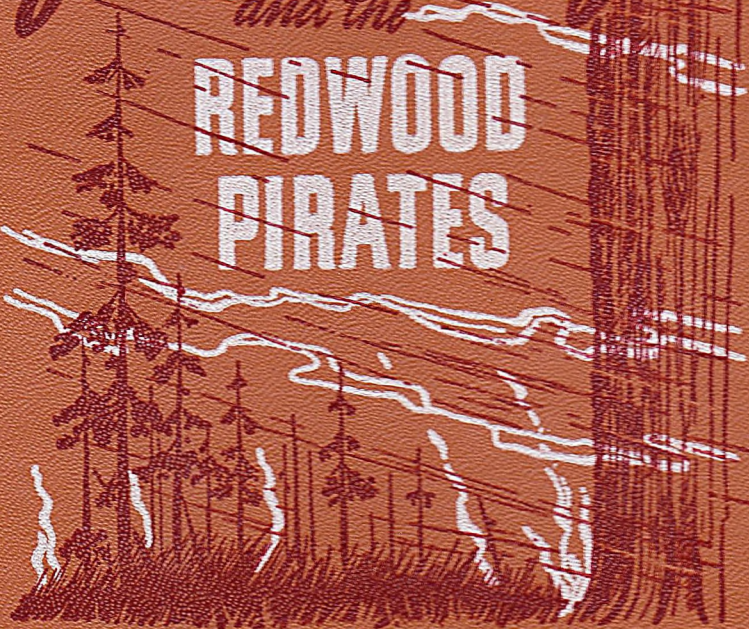
RACINE, WISCONSIN



Gene Autry

and the

**REDWOOD
PIRATES**



*Gene
Hautoy*

and the

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GENE AUTRY

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An original story featuring
GENE AUTRY
famous motion picture star as the hero

By BOB HAMILTON

Illustrated by
ERWIN L. HESS

Authorized Edition

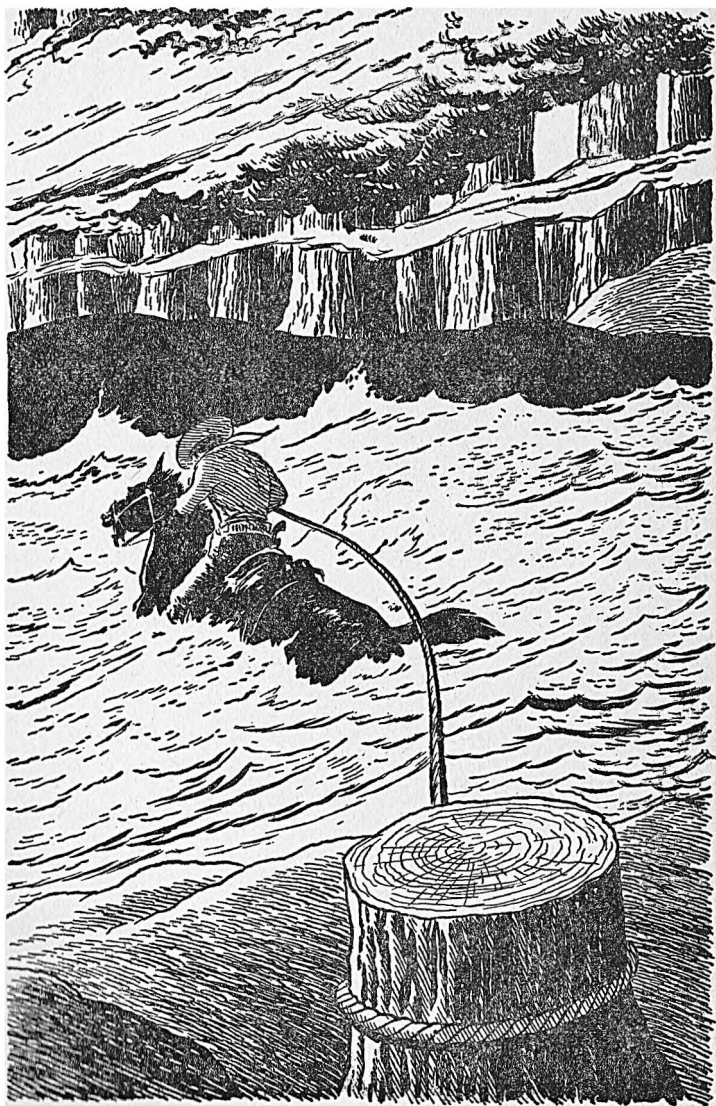
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Champ Plunged into the Churning Water

GENE AUTRY

and the Redwood Pirates

CHAPTER ONE

DANGER! HIGH VOLTAGE!

The solitary horseman had followed the high fence for ten miles. He knew it was ten miles because he'd counted the signs as he passed them. They were small signs, suspended from the top wire of the fence at hundred-yard intervals. They said, "Danger! High Voltage!"

To pass the time the rider had been speculating on the cost of that fence. It was no ordinary fence. It was high enough and strong enough to keep out intruders without the use of electricity. The wires were strung on heavy steel posts imbedded in concrete. The fence alone had probably cost more than the average ranch, including stock and buildings. But cost was something that didn't bother Thaddeus Tyler.

The rider reined up at a gatehouse and dismounted. Beyond the gate he could see a double row of stately trees bordering a winding road.

A man, wearing a heavy gun in a polished leather

holster, stepped from the gatehouse. "Well," he demanded in an unfriendly tone, "what d'you want?"

"I came to see the Double T owner," replied the visitor.

The guard studied the big, strong chestnut horse with the eye of a man who knew horses. "Ain't comin' to sell him a horse, are yuh?" he asked.

"No."

"Does Mr. Tyler expect yuh?"

"I don't think he expects me, but I guess he'll see me. What're the rules for getting inside the fence?"

"First I gotta phone the house an' let the boss know who y'are an' what yuh want."

"Just tell him that Gene Autry's here."

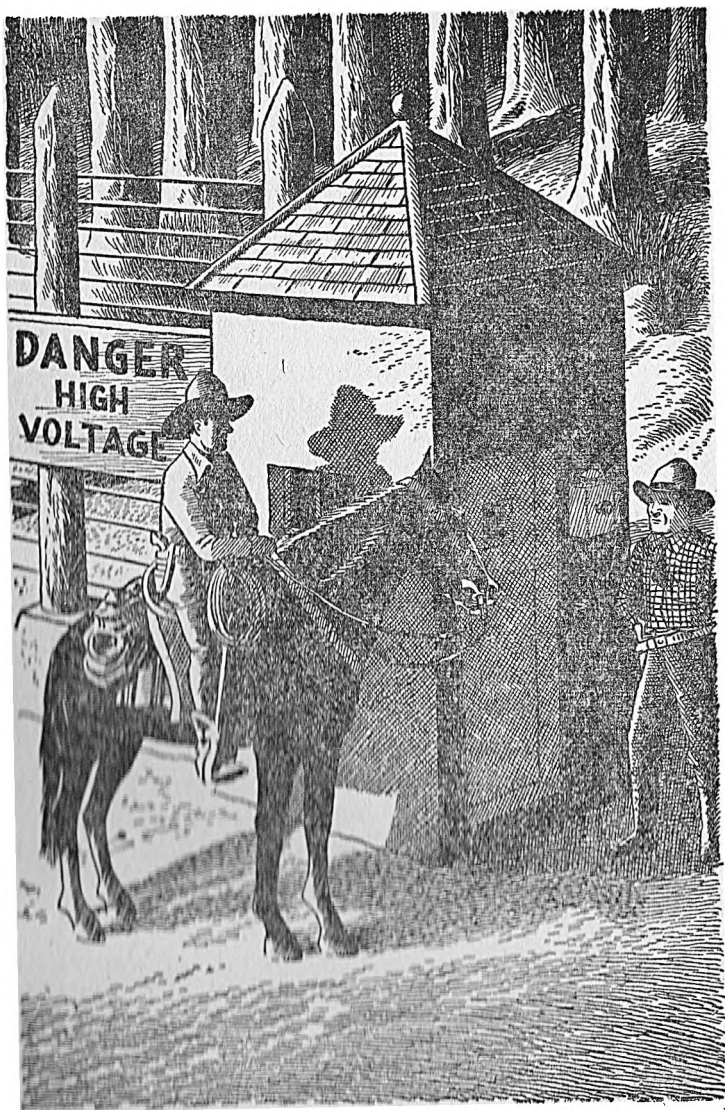
The guard nodded. "What's your business?" he said.

"I'm not here on business. I just want to talk to Tyler."

"I'll tell him. You wait right there."

Gene Autry nodded, a smile turning the corners of his mouth. He was amused by the way the suspicious guard kept him under surveillance while he stepped to a phone that hung on the outside wall of the gatehouse.

Thaddeus Tyler had traveled a long way up the road of financial success in the ten years since Gene Autry had met him. The Double T, though designated as a ranch, was more like a tight little king-



"Tell Him Gene Autry's Here."

dom with Thad Tyler as the absolute ruler. There were a good many stories circulating about the Tyler monarchy. Tyler had tried to keep his name and stories about his ranch out of the newspapers, but stories had got around in spite of his efforts. Most of the stories were fabulous, though many were founded on fact. It was true that Tyler had played host to countless people of world-wide fame. Men who were high in international affairs, both financial and political, had spent days and nights inside the charged fence. Thaddeus Tyler had sat in his library with men whose power, it was whispered, could make whole nations dance like puppets on strings.

Gene Autry knew of at least one instance when three men came from Europe to spend three weeks with Thaddeus Tyler. The trip had been kept a carefully guarded secret. No one suspected that the three men, whose names were international news, had left their homeland.

The gate-man turned squarely toward Gene. Speaking into the phone he said, "He's about medium height an' dressed like a cowboy. Got a clean-cut look about him."

Gene grinned thanks for the compliment.

"Yeah," the guard went on. "He smiles easy. The horse? Well, it's a mighty fine-lookin' hunk o' horse-flesh. In fact, it's as fine as anything you got in the

stable." The guard listened a moment, then spoke to Gene. "What's the name of your horse?"

"Champ."

The guard relayed the information to the phone. "He calls his horse 'Champ.'" A pause, and then—"O.K."

The guard hung up the phone and looked at Gene Autry with an expression of admiration mixed with surprise. "T.T. says you're to go right in. He's in the small house."

"The small house?" repeated Gene.

"He calls it the small house. It's got about thirty rooms."

Gene whistled softly. "Wonder what the big house is like," he muttered.

"You never seen it?"

"This is the first time I've been here."

The guard's manner had become friendly. "I'll tell yuh," he said. "T.T. built himself a reg'lar castle in there. You see it when you get past the trees. It's built of stone that was hauled from a long way off. Got towers an' everything, just like them castles you read about in Europe. Must be more'n a hundred rooms in that there castle. Some o' the furniture come all the way from museums in France an' England."

"I've heard something about the castle," Gene said, "but I didn't know there was another house."

"Yep," grinned the guard. "T.T. was entertainin' some gents from England an' they was sort of let down when they seen the castle. They'd looked fer somethin' different."

"Oh."

"I reckon they expected to see the wild an' woolly West. That got T.T. started. He built a ranch house—the biggest I ever heard tell of. He packed it full o' western stuff, then put up a big barn an' stable an' a corral an' everything that went with 'em. He calls that layout the small house. Spends most of his time there. His Ma likes it better'n the castle."

Gene said, "I guess I'd better shove on. If Tyler's expecting me, he won't want to be kept waiting."

The guard nodded and touched a button near the wall phone. The gates swung open.

CHAPTER TWO

DOUBLE T

Gene Autry was particularly interested in the trees that bordered the approach to Thaddeus Tyler's house. They were redwoods and sequoias, whose life expectancy might be measured in centuries instead of years. The trees on the Double T ranch were comparatively young. They were nothing like the immense giants in the redwood country that Gene Autry expected to visit in the near future.

The ranch house was made of pine logs. It had a rustic appearance but there was nothing at all crude about the interior. Money had been spent with a lavish hand to make the house a study in perfection. Gene stood in a long hall, the walls of which were knotty pine that had been rubbed to a satin sheen. The floor that showed between the rugs was made of wide planks fastened down with wooden pegs. The mounted heads of animals and other trophies decorated the walls.

Hat in hand, Gene stood in the center of the room where the white jacketed Filipino had left him. He turned as a door on his left swung open.

A white haired lady approached with her hand

extended. She welcomed Gene Autry to the Double T ranch and introduced herself. "I'm Thaddeus's mother."

"I'm certainly glad to know you, Mrs. Tyler," replied Gene.

"Thad's often spoken of you. Sit down and take a load off your high-heeled boots. Thad'll be downstairs in a few minutes."

There was a heartiness about the old lady that Gene Autry liked. She seemed sincere and unspoiled by her lavish surroundings. In her speech there was a certain saltiness that reminded Gene of the pioneer women that had worked and fought side by side with their men to conquer the West.

"You haven't seen Thad for some time have you, Gene?" asked Mrs. Tyler.

"I guess it's been about ten years."

The woman nodded. "That," she said, "was before he made all his money. You'll find that he's changed a lot in those ten years."

"I expect he has."

"Yep. I wouldn't say that cash has spoiled him. It's just made him mighty guarded and hard to approach. But then, I guess that's natural. There's been a lot of sharpshooters tryin' to get the best of Thad. So far he's managed to come out on top. How'd you an' Thad get acquainted?"

"I was a deputy lawman at the time," explained

Gene Autry. "Thad was in a big business deal and there was a shooting. The evidence pointed to Thad."

"Um-hum," replied the woman calmly. "I remember something about it. You nailed the real killer an' got the heat off my boy, wasn't that it?"

Gene nodded.

As if reading his thoughts, Mrs. Tyler said, "I reckon you wonder where I got my style of talk. Well, I'll tell you, son. I've been through a lot in my sixty-five years. My folks came to the West in '85. When I was a young one, my playthings were rattlers an' gila monsters. I was in Frisco during the earthquake. That's where I met Tyler. Thad was born the following year an' the next year after that my husband died."

Gene looked at the old lady with admiration. "You did a pretty good job of bringing up your son," he said.

"I dunno about that. Sometimes I think I did, an' sometimes I think I didn't."

"Didn't you spend some time in the redwood country?"

"Sure did. Tyler left me a little piece of timberland an' I took the baby an' went there to run the lumberin' camp. I was the general kingpin for a good many years. Knew every man in the outfit right down to the swamps. Those were mighty

lively days." A look of retrospection came into Mrs. Tyler's blue eyes. "We had a crummie in that camp that was a hard lot."

"A crummie?"

"That's the name for the boss of the bunkhouse."

"Oh."

"That crummie went around packin' a six-gun on each hip. I had to shoot him."

Gene stared in surprise at the calm way Mrs. Tyler made the astonishing statement.

"Oh, I didn't kill him," laughed the old lady. "I just drilled him in the arm so he couldn't put a slug through the hasher—that's the cook, you know. Y'see, Gene, we had a new cookie and he wasn't any too good. The boys grumbled about the food for the first few meals, then they got up one day an' walked the table. They kicked all the dishes off to show that they wouldn't take any more of that kind of eatin'. The crummie came in from the bunkhouse, saw what was goin' on, an' got so sore he went after the hasher with his gun. That's when I shot."

"Mother!" said Thad Tyler from the door.

"Come in, son. I'm entertaining your friend."

Thaddeus Tyler came in laughing. "She loves to tell about the old days," he explained as he gripped Gene Autry's hand. "How are you?"

"Fine," replied Gene.

"You haven't changed as much as I have, Gene.

I guess I've put on considerable weight since the last time we met."

Gene grinned at Thaddeus Tyler's bulging waist-line.

"I'll go tell Cookie we've got company for supper," said Mrs. Tyler.

When she had left the room, Tyler motioned to a pair of chairs in the corner. "What do you think of my layout?" he asked.

"You've got a place to be proud of, Tyler. Still single?"

Tyler nodded. "Been too busy to think of getting married," he said. "I guess I've missed a lot of things in life while I've been piling up a couple of fortunes."

"Still dealing in lumber?"

"Why?"

"I wanted to ask a few questions about the red-wood country."

Tyler shook his head slowly. "I got out of the lumber business some time ago. I've been in a lot of things since then. I get into something and get out of it. Then into something else."

Gene nodded.

"Are you still a lawman?"

Gene said, "Not exactly."

Tyler laughed. "That," he said, "is the way you expressed it when I saw you ten years ago. You

weren't 'exactly' a lawman."

"I guess I haven't changed much."

"Did you come here to ask about redwood lumber?"

"Yes."

"And I flattered myself that you came to visit me because of old times' sake."

"The truth is," Gene went on, "there's something going on in the redwood country. I wanted to get a few facts and I came to the man that I thought was most likely to know those facts."

"I hear from the redwood country from time to time," Tyler said. "I have men keeping me posted. Perhaps you came to the right man."

It might have been merely imagination, but Gene thought he noted a guardedness in the way Thad Tyler spoke.

"What do you want to know?" Tyler inquired.

"I'll lay the cards right on the table," Gene Autry said frankly. "I—"

"Wait," broke in Tyler as his mother returned to the room. Softly he said, "Save it until after supper when we're alone."

CHAPTER THREE

BY CANDLELIGHT

In the candlelight that graced Thaddeus Tyler's dining-room Gene Autry studied the face of his host. The meal should have been one that Gene would always remember. It featured rare delicacies that Tyler had imported from all corners of the world, served by silent and efficient men in white mess jackets. But Gene hardly knew what he was eating. Although he took part in the conversation with Mrs. Tyler, his mind was not on the subject of discussion. He was thinking about Thad Tyler. There was something strange about the man. He laughed easily and spoke in a frank and hearty manner but his good nature seemed to stop when it reached his eyes. Those eyes were what made Gene wonder. They seemed to be covered by an opaque film that made it impossible to read the thoughts that went through Tyler's mind. There was nothing genial or frank about Thad Tyler's eyes.

When the coffee had been served, Tyler instructed the servants to stay out. He looked across the table at his mother. She excused herself and left the room, closing the door behind her.

"Now," Thad Tyler said, "you and I can talk."

"I didn't have anything to say that couldn't have been said in front of your mother."

"Maybe not," replied Tyler, snipping the end off a cigar with a small gold gadget on his watch chain. "But Mother sometimes breaks in on a conversation. We can talk better without her here."

Gene shrugged his shoulders.

"You don't want a cigar?"

"I don't smoke," replied Gene.

"Well, let's get to the subject of your visit. What do you want to know about the redwood forest?"

"There's a good market for lumber now, isn't there?" asked Gene casually.

"There sure is," replied Tyler heartily. "A mighty good market. I don't know as this country has ever had such an acute shortage of straight-grained, grade-A lumber."

Gene Autry nodded. "That's what I thought."

"Believe me," Tyler went on, "I've been kicking myself that I didn't get back into lumber at the right time. Why, just look at the situation in this country—in the whole world. Millions of people want to build new homes. Millions want to improve, remodel, or repair old ones. Hundreds of thousands want to build or expand their stores and factories. There's manpower to do the work and cash to pay for it. Never in the history of the world has there

been such a demand for lumber as there is right now."

Gene was somewhat surprised at Tyler's outburst. "Do you mean to tell me you missed the chance to get into a market like that?" he asked.

Tyler nodded and said, "I guess I must be slowing down."

"Do you happen to know a man named Danahy?"

"Danahy?"

Gene nodded. "Steve Danahy."

Tyler pursed his lips reflectively and studied the glowing end of his cigar. "Don't seem to recall the name," he said, after a pause. "What's his line?"

"Lumber. Redwood lumber."

Tyler shook his head slowly. "Haven't heard of anyone named Danahy in connection with lumber. Why do you ask about him?"

"I've heard that he's been gaining control of considerable acreage in the mountains. There are some ngly stories about some of the stunts he's used to get that acreage."

Tyler said, "Is that so?"

Gene Autry nodded.

Tyler leaned forward, resting his elbows on the fine damask that covered the table. "Gene," he said, "you used to be something of a lawman. Are you asking these questions in that connection?"

"Possibly."

"Are you, by any chance, planning to go up into the redwood country to investigate the—the 'ugly stories' you've heard?"

"Yes," replied Gene. "I am."

"Don't go."

Gene looked at his host in surprise.

"I mean it," went on Thaddeus Tyler. "Don't go up there."

"Why not?"

"I haven't been entirely out of touch with lumber. I've heard some of the stories that have come from the redwood country. I know enough about the situation up there to know that there's a certain amount of truth in some of those stories. If any investigation has to be made, let the regular agencies of the law take care of it. You keep out of it."

"Why?" repeated Gene, simply.

"Because I say so."

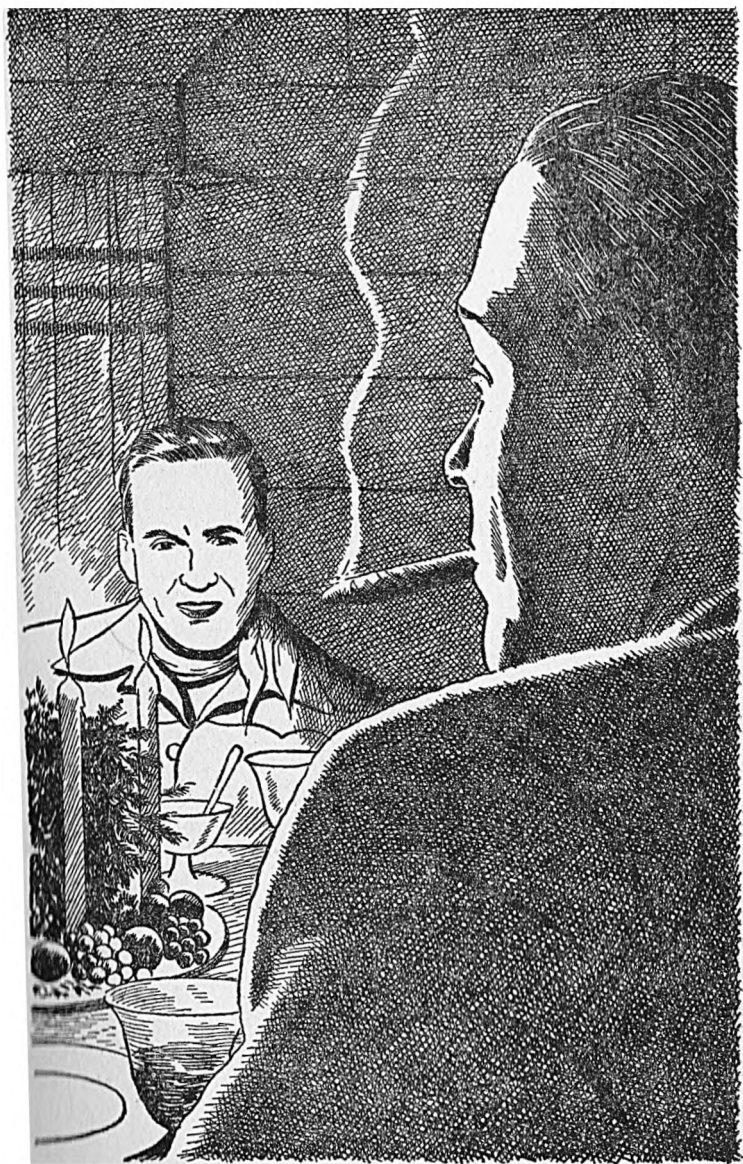
"Why do you say so?"

"Because I like you."

Gene grinned. "Thanks for that," he said. "But that's no reason for me to stay out of the mountains."

"I'll be more frank. I'd hate to see you run up against a situation that you couldn't handle. And that's just what you'll meet if you pry into the redwood industry."

"Then you know things, eh, Tyler?"



"Don't Go," Thad Tyler Warned

"No details, but I know enough to justify my warning. I tell you, Gene, the most ruthless men in the world are going after redwood for all they're worth. It's a game for high stakes and the chips are down. It's a game that is going to go on in spite of all that anyone can do to stop it. It's dog eat dog and the devil take the hindmost."

"Is Steve Danahy involved?"

"I—" Tyler broke off suddenly and then continued. "I don't know Steve Danahy," he finished. "I do, however, know that there's big money in back of the syndicate."

"Syndicate?" cut in Gene Autry. "What syndicate?"

Tyler's poise didn't desert him. He blew a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling, then broke the long ash off the end of his cigar. "There is," he said, "a syndicate in control of the redwood industry. Everyone who owns timberland is either in the syndicate or out of it."

"Naturally."

"Those who are not in the syndicate are standing in the way of progress. They're holding on to their timber, waiting for prices to go up. That's not good, is it?"

"It all depends."

"Take my word for it, it's not good. Now that's all I can tell you. I don't know any details. As I

said, I'm not interested in lumber."

"You spoke of men who are not in the syndicate," Gene said. "What is the syndicate doing about those men? Are they being left alone?"

"I can't tell you any more because I don't know."

"I'll bet they're not," muttered Gene. "I'll bet the syndicate is putting pressure on them. And when pressure fails—"

"When pressure fails?" Tyler repeated as Gene Autry paused.

"Maybe that's when those ugly rumors I spoke of got started." Gene pushed his chair back from the table and rose to his feet. "I guess I'd better be going," he said.

"Going? Aren't you staying overnight?"

Gene shook his head.

"But you haven't seen anything of the Double T ranch. I thought you'd be here for a few days. I'd like to show you around. We'll do some riding and hunting."

"No thanks," smiled Gene. "I'd sure like to, but I want to get started as soon as possible."

"Started?"

"For the redwood country. It's going to be a pretty long trip for Champ and me, and the sooner we start, the sooner we'll get there."

"Then you're determined to go, in spite of my warnings?"

Gene nodded and said, "I'm stubborn about some things. I guess I've got to ride up into those mountains and see if I can find this gent named Danahy. There are a few questions I'd like to ask him."

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HAUNTED MAN

Gene Autry and his powerful horse, Champ, had been traveling for several days. For the past ten hours their course had taken them through forests so dense that only the merest trickles of sunlight touched the ground. Some of the giant trees were more than eight feet in diameter. Gene looked at those monarchs with a feeling of awe as he recalled something he'd seen in a museum.

It was a slab of wood—a cross section—cut from one of the trees in these mountains. The rings of growth had been marked and labeled by scientists. There was one ring that showed the size of the tree when Washington's army wintered at Valley Forge. Another ring, slightly nearer the center, had been formed the year that the Pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock. There was a ring bearing the label "1492." The tree had been an adult when Columbus set foot on the soil of the new world. There were other labels, marking periods of history during which the woody giant had thrived. It had been growing during the days of King Richard the Lion Hearted and the earlier days of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. There were

trees in this forest that were just as large as that museum specimen.

The knowledge made Gene feel small and insignificant—humble in the midst of such stately dignity.

He was traveling in a westerly direction, bearing slightly to the north. The Chicapoo River was somewhere ahead. Beyond the Chicapoo, he knew, there was a lumbering camp that the syndicate controlled. That lumbering camp was his destination.

"I don't think we'll make it before sunset," he muttered to Champ. "First good-looking campsite we find, we'll rein up."

After a few minutes more of riding, the sound of a running stream reached Gene's ears. Running water, he knew, was generally clear, and clear water was something to be desired in a camp. He headed toward the sound.

The soft pad of leaves beneath Champ's hoofs made the horse's tread almost silent. This was probably the reason that Gene's arrival at the stream came as a shocking surprise to old Cal Peabody.

Cal leaped to his feet as Gene broke through a curtain of dense growth at the edge of the stream. "Don't shoot," he cried in alarm. "Don't shoot an old man."

Gene saw that the hands, held high over the

white-haired old fellow's head, were gnarled and heavy-veined. They trembled in fear—the same fear that showed in the stranger's deep-set eyes.

"Take it easy," Gene said. "I'm not going to shoot you." He rode across the narrow stream and dismounted. "Put your hands down."

The man was obviously moved by abject fear. He kept his hands high. His voice retained the shrill pitch of one whose emotions and nerves had been stretched to the breaking point. "Yuh can't shoot an old, unarmed man in cold blood," he cried. "Yuh can't do that. Please lemme live, I never hurt nobody an' I never will."

Gene smiled as he stepped to the fearful old fellow. "Listen to me," he said softly. "No one's going to hurt you."

The old man comprehended slowly. "Y—Yuh mean," he stammered, "y-yuh ain't b-been sent tuh gun m-me down?"

Gene shook his head. "I'm heading north," he said. "I'm traveling alone and I intend to camp here to rest my horse. If you want to share my chuck, you're welcome to it."

The toil-worn hands went down slowly. "Didn't you come from the Chicapoo River?"

Gene shook his head. "I came from that way," he explained, motioning with his thumb.

"Then Vince Zachery didn't send you to gun me?"

"No one sent me to gun you," replied Gene patiently.

A deep sigh rose from the old man. "I—I thought fer sure you'd come from the camp."

"What camp?"

"Zachery's camp on t'other side of the Chicapoo River." The old man nodded nervously.

Gene proceeded to remove the saddle from Champ's back. "Give me a hand," he invited, "and as soon as I get my sougan unpacked, we'll spread out a little food."

Gene refrained from asking any pointed questions until he'd removed the last trace of the fear that haunted the old man. Champ's saddle was hung on the low limb of a near-by tree. The blankets were unrolled and the camp equipment spread out. Gene lopped off some wood from a fallen tree and split it into small pieces. In a few moments he had a fire burning brightly. In the meantime, he learned that the old man's name was Cal Peabody, and that he had been in hiding by the stream for the past twenty-four hours.

Bacon sizzled in the pan and coffee bubbled merrily and fragrantly in the pot. While old Cal kept a hungry eye on the big, thick slices of bacon, Gene turned the "twist." This was a doughy mass that he'd mixed and spiraled on the shaved end of a green stick. When cooked above the flames of the

fire, it became tasty bread that woodsmen sometimes prepared as a change from sourdough biscuits.

"Don't you have a horse?" asked Gene as he slid the stick from the crispy twist.

Cal shook his head. "Got no bushtail at all. Had tuh travel on foot. I been travelin' night an' day. Had nothin' tuh eat but some berries I picked on the way. I got here an' my legs gave out. I couldn't go no farther."

"Let's see how much of that bacon we can put away," said Gene. "There's lots more in the saddlebags."

Cal nodded vigorously and started eating.

Gene couldn't help comparing Cal's thorough enjoyment of the simple fare with Thad Tyler's uninterested way of eating the perfectly prepared delicacies at the Double T.

"I'm a hasher myself," Cal volunteered as he began his fifth slab of bacon. "Been a hasher for a good many years."

"A good one?"

"One o' the best. Yes siree!"

Gene Autry remembered what Mrs. Tyler had said. "Ever have any of the boys walk the table?"

Cal looked up, sharply. "How'd you know?" he demanded.

"I didn't know. I just asked."

The old man squinted suspiciously. "Are you,"

he demanded, "sure you ain't come from Zachery's camp?"

"Dead sure," laughed Gene. "How many times do I have to tell you the same thing?"

"Mighty odd," mumbled Cal. "Downright curious that you'd ask about men walkin' my table. That's just what happened in the camp."

"Is that why you ran away?"

"Nope. I ran away because o' the same reason that the men walked the table on me. They done that because Zach wanted tuh kill me.

"It's a—a sort of long story. Y'see, Zach wanted to get me fired from the camp an' he didn't have no cause to fire a hasher except that the cookin' wasn't no good. So he started spoilin' the grub I fixed. He loaded it with salt an' pepper, an' he done a lot of other things that'd spoil the food an' make the men git sore. They ain't nothin' makes a lumberin' man get sore quicker'n to have the food no good."

"So they walked the table?"

Cal nodded sadly. "First time in my life it ever happened," he said. Then with a ring of defiance he added, "But it wasn't my fault. Zachery framed it! He did it so's he'd have cause to fire me."

"A good cook is hard to get," Gene observed. "Why did he want to fire you?"

"He wanted me to leave the camp an' be in the woods alone, so's he could kill me."



"Zach Wanted to Kill Me," Cal Mumbled

Gene knew that his surprise at this statement showed in his face. He couldn't suppress it.

"When you came along," Cal continued, "I thought you'd been sent by Zach."

"But why would he want to kill you? What did you do to him?"

"Nothin' at all." Cal seemed disinclined to say any more about his affair in the camp. Gene Autry thought the wise course might be to question along a different line.

"Who is Vince Zachery? What's his job?"

"He's been darn near everything. First he was a swamper, then a four-up driver an' a skidway man. Then, for a long time, he was a cruiser."

"He must've known big timber to have been a cruiser."

"He knows timber all right enough. He c'n cruise a piece of land and calc'late the cordage to five per cent."

"Is he a cruiser now?"

Cal shook his head and said, "Nope. He got hurt an' went a little lame. He's been a pencil pusher ever since."

Gene wasn't familiar with all the vernacular of the lumbering industry. "A pencil pusher?" he repeated.

"Uh-huh. Works in the office. Keeps books an' time an' such things."

"He doesn't sound very murderous to me."

"You should've seen him the day he found me asleep outside the window of his office. By thunder, he was so mad that his nose was tight! I thought he'd run a knife clean through me right there on the spot."

"Just because you were sleeping?"

Cal jabbed another slice of bacon with his knife and shook his head. "Not because I was sleepin'," he said. "It was because he thought I wasn't sleepin'."

This was a rather bewildering statement, but it was clarified a moment later. "I was stretched out on the soft grass, just outside the office window. Seems that Zach had been doin' some talkin' inside o' the office. When he got done, he came out an' seen me there. He figured that I'd overheard some of what'd been said. He kicked me in the ribs an' started shoutin' at me—chargin' me with snoopin' around an' sneakin' up to eavesdrop on him."

"Did you hear anything?"

"Not much of anything. Nothin' important."

"But you did hear something?"

"No, no," cried Cal emphatically. "I didn't hear a darn thing."

Gene smiled at the old man and said, "You needn't be afraid to trust me, Cal."

"I—I still ain't so sure about that. For all I know, Zach might've sent you to question me an' see if I was really asleep."

Gene pretended that he'd been hurt. "A fine way," he said, "to treat a man that's shared his food with you. I thought you and I were going to be friends."

"W-Well I—uh—" fumbled Cal.

"If you still doubt what I told you, why don't you walk along my backtrail. You can see that I didn't come from the Chicapoo River."

"Aw-w, I—I reckon I c'n trust you."

"That's more like it."

"You—uh—you want to know what I heard when I was outside that window?"

Gene Autry nodded.

"It wasn't much. All I heard was Zach tellin' someone that he'd give Redwood Jackson one more chance. He said that Jackson would sell out or he'd sure wish he'd done so!"

Gene Autry hung on those words. The fear-haunted old man had given him some information of genuine importance.

CHAPTER FIVE

REDWOOD JACKSON

"Who," asked Gene Autry, "is Redwood Jackson?"

"Yuh don't know him?"

Gene shook his head.

"You must be a stranger around here."

"I am."

"Redwood is the most cussed, stubborn, ornery old curmudgeon that ever drewed a breath. He owns some timber land that's downright valuable. He owns some trees that'd bring a fortune. But he won't cut 'em an' he won't let no one else cut 'em. What's more, he won't sell out."

"Sell out to whom?"

"To the syndicate, of course," replied Cal Peabody. "Vince Zachery's camp is owned by the syndicate an' they want to cut redwood off'n the Jackson land. Jackson won't let 'em an' he won't sell."

"And you heard Zachery say that if Jackson didn't sell, he'd be sorry."

"That's what I heard an' that's *all* I heard. It beats me why Zach was so all-fired sore when he thought I'd heard him makin' plans."

"I wish you'd heard more about those plans."

"Well, I didn't."

"How far is it from here to Redwood Jackson's house?"

"Tain't so far. You keep on along this stream. Just follow it upstream for about four miles an' you'll see the Jackson place. Why you goin' there?"

"I'd like to know the man who thinks these trees are more important than money."

"Yuh won't find Jackson an easy man tuh talk to."

"That doesn't matter."

Gene began scraping the cooking utensils and gathering up the equipment. "I'm going to break camp," he said. "I'll leave some food here so you can camp for a few days. I'll be back to join you."

"You're aimin' to get to his place before dark?"

"I think I can make it," replied Gene.

"You'd better keep your eyes open. Jackson's got guards in his timber. He's given them orders to shoot strangers. I ran into a couple of them on my way here."

"They didn't shoot you."

"Nope," replied Cal. "I know most of 'em."

Gene rolled his blanket and strapped it to the back of Champ.

"You don't figure to be back here tonight?" asked Cal.

"I don't know what my plans'll be. It depends on what turns up when I talk to Jackson." When Gene

Autry finished loading Champ for travel, he turned to the old man and said, "What are your plans, Cal? Are you going to keep moving?"

"That's all I can do, unless I can get me a job o' some sort with Redwood Jackson. There ain't no one else around here but Jackson 'an' the syndicate. I can't go back to the syndicate camp. So if I can't line up with Jackson, I'll have to keep movin'."

"Have you tried to get a job with Jackson?"

"Ain't had the nerve tuh ask. He's so all-fired cantankerous there's no tellin' what he'd do."

"He can't eat you alive," laughed Gene.

"I ain't so sure about that," replied Cal dubiously.

"How'd it be if I spoke to him about you?"

"I'd sure appreciate it."

Gene nodded and said, "O.K." He was about to mount when another thought struck him. "By the way," he asked Cal Peabody, "do you know a man named Steve Danahy?"

"Do I know him? I should say I do."

"You do?" There was eagerness in Gene's voice.

"Do you know where I can find him?"

"Sure thing! He's the boss of the syndicate camp."

"The camp you were in?"

"Yep," nodded Cal.

"Then Zachery works for him?"

"Sure. Zach is pencil pushin' in the office of Danahy's camp."

Gene smiled happily and said, "Somehow, Cal, the minute I saw you I felt that I might strike gold if I talked to you long enough."

"Huh? I don't savvy."

"Danahy is one man I want to talk to!"

"You was goin' to talk to Redwood Jackson."

"And after that," said Gene Autry, "Steve Danahy." He swung to the saddle and rode upstream.

Gene Autry didn't know when he entered the property of Redwood Jackson. There were no fences or signs to indicate the boundary line. At some time in the course of two miles of riding he became a trespasser. He found this out when two men, armed with carbines, leaped from behind trees and blocked his way.

"Get 'em up," barked the first man.

Gene reined up quickly.

"Dismount!" ordered a huge, black-bearded man.

"Git off'n that horse an' keep yer hands away from that gunbelt."

Gene did as directed while two rifles covered his every move.

The first man who'd spoken stepped forward and seized the reins of Champ, while the second, the black-bearded one, came toward Gene Autry.

"Hand over them guns," he said.

Gene smiled easily and shook his head slowly.

"That," he said, "is something I don't intend to do."

The man with the rifle glowered darkly. "I ain't givin' you no choice," he snarled. "What I said was an order an' I'm ready tuh back it with gunpowder an' steel-jacketed slugs! Now stranger, you hand over your guns!"

"I came here," replied Gene, "to call on Redwood Jackson."

"You'll call on him quick enough. That's right where you're goin', only before we take yuh there, you're goin' to be disarmed. Hand over the guns or I'll take 'em from yuh."

"I wouldn't try it if I were you," Gene replied. "You see, I came here as a sort of lawman. Now it wouldn't look good if a lawman let a couple of rifle-toters take his guns, would it?"

"I don't care how it looks, that's what I aim tuh do. What's more, if I have to take 'em away from yuh, I might be rough about it."

"That wouldn't be smart," Gene said.

The man who held Champ's bridle looked confused. He was half a head taller than Gene Autry and the man with the heavy black beard was even larger. The casual way in which Gene defied the pair was hard to understand. There had to be some reason for the smiling confidence that sparked the cowboy's manner.

"Go ahead, Blackie. Snatch his guns."

The man with the beard paused. "You here

alone?" he asked.

Gene said, "Just my horse and me."

"You're mighty doggoned sure of yourself."

"A man has to be sure of himself to travel alone in this country. Isn't that so?"

"What're yuh waitin' for, Blackie?"

"You mind yer own business, Fred," the one called Blackie retorted. "I'll handle this critter."

"Then take his guns an' we'll run him tuh Redwood."

Gene stood easily, his feet spaced a few inches and his hands held at shoulder level. "Going to try it, Blackie?" he asked.

"You got somethin' up yer sleeve or you wouldn't be so calm. I could take you by the neck an' ankles an' snap yer spine in two across my knee. What right you got to stand there grinnin' at me?"

"If you ain't got the nerve tuh take his shootin' irons," barked Fred, "hold this bridle an' I'll do it myself."

"We're not getting any place at all," Gene said. "If you don't make up your mind what you're going to do, it'll get dark while we stand here talking."

"We ain't standin' here no longer," Blackie said sharply. "I'll have them guns." He made a sudden move. Then it happened.

Gene shouted a single word and Champ went into action with a suddenness that took Fred and Blackie

off balance. The big horse lunged toward Fred, hitting him hard with the left shoulder. Fred let out a sudden gasp, then staggered backward to retain his footing. He tripped over a protruding root and sprawled, letting go of the reins.

Blackie turned to see what had happened. His eyes, for a brief instant, were off Gene Autry. Realizing his mistake, he quickly turned back, but the split second was all that Gene needed. His fist shot forward, catching Blackie in the pit of the stomach. It was a short blow, but it traveled with stunning force. Blackie gasped and bent over. As his head came down, Gene's left fist came up to meet the chin. There was a sharp crack of fist on bone. Blackie's head snapped up and back and a startled look came into his eyes. Gene pivoted quickly, drew his right hand back and swung from the hip. He felt the impact of the blow to Blackie's head, all the way to his elbow. Blackie went limp. His knees buckled and he slumped to the ground.

Fred was struggling to his feet. He grabbed the rifle he'd dropped and turned to bring it to bear on the slender man when a gun barked and echoed in the trees. The rifle in Fred's hand jerked suddenly. There was a metallic ring as a heavy bullet smacked the blue steel barrel of the rifle. The shock went through Fred's hands and arms. He dropped the rifle as if it had suddenly become red hot.

"That'll do," snapped Gene. He stood balanced, a gun in each hand. "If either of you rannies have any more notions of taking my guns, just step up and say so."

"Does that go for me too?" said a voice from Gene's left. A tall, broad-shouldered man with sandy hair and a ruddy complexion stepped from the trees. "I saw the whole thing," he said. "What's more, I enjoyed every minute of it."

Fred stared open-mouthed at the newcomer and muttered, "Jackson."

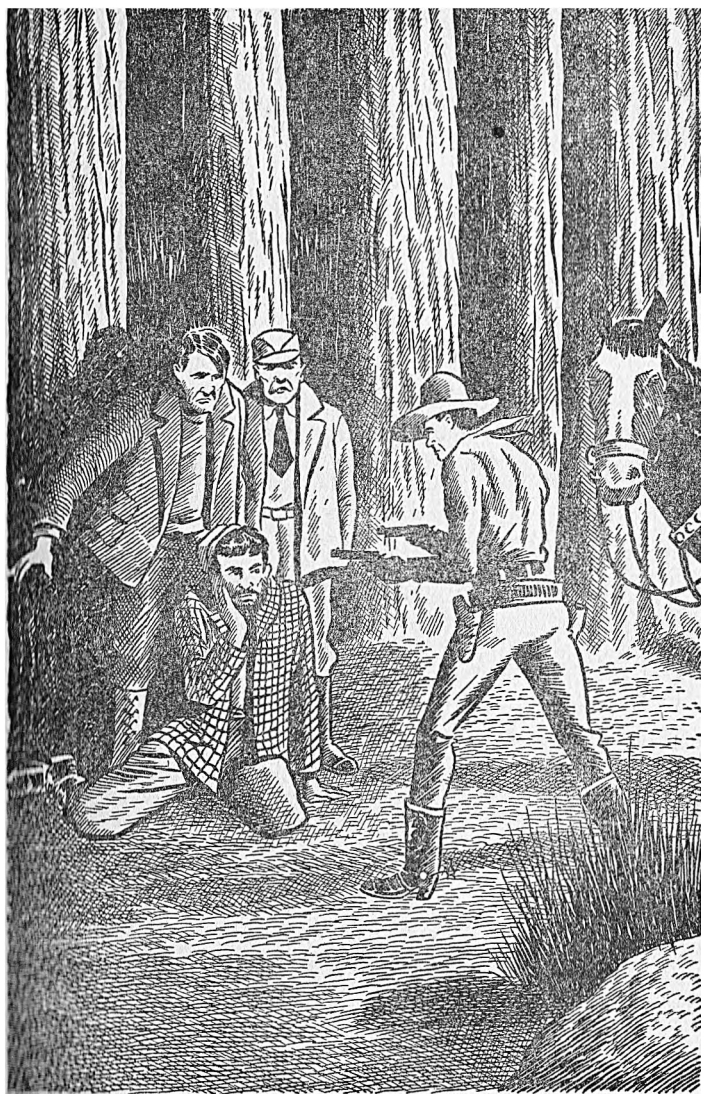
The ruddy-faced man nodded and frowned. "Yeah," he said. "It looks as if I'd picked men that looked a lot tougher than they really were." To Blackie he said, "Pick yourself up and go about your business. Next time you see someone prowlin' through my timber, you'd better grab him from behind."

"Now wait, Boss," pleaded Blackie, getting to his feet. "This critter ain't nothin' ordinary. If you seen the hull thing, you seen how he got the jump on us."

"I saw the whole thing an' I heard this gent say that he was somethin' of a lawman." To Gene he said, "Is that the truth?"

Gene Autry said, "I'm here in the interests of the law. If you're Redwood Jackson, you're the man I want to talk to."

"And if," replied Jackson, "you're representin' de-



Gene Balanced a Gun in Each Hand

cent an' honest law, I want to talk to you!"

"I came up here to find out about the way the syndicate is getting timberland."

"They ain't got my land yet an' they ain't goin' to get it while I'm able to trigger a gun. What's your name?"

"Gene Autry."

"Gene Autry," repeated Redwood. "Mean to say you're the gent that smashed the Morgan gang?"

Gene smiled and said, "I guess I had a hand in that affair."

"Well, I'll be hanged," growled Blackie. "If I'd knowed you was the gent that'd put Rance Morgan behind the bars, I'd never o' been fool enough tuh do what I did. Why in thunder didn't yuh tell me an' Fred who you was?"

"You didn't ask."

"We figured you was from the syndicate an' that's why we got proddy with yuh."

Fred looked at Champ with admiration. "That's the Champ horse!" His voice was hushed with respect. "By gobs, I reckon I should feel honored tuh have held the bridle of a horse like that un."

Blackie rubbed his chin with a rueful expression. "Fer a gent your size," he muttered, "you sure got lots of fist."

"You two go on your patrol," ordered Redwood. "I'm takin' Autry to the house. There's considerable

that I'd like to tell him."

Gene thought this might be a good time to speak in behalf of his recent friend. "Just a minute," he said.

Redwood Jackson looked questioningly at him.

"There's an old hasher a couple of miles back-trail. He was in the syndicate camp. They ran him out."

"Bad cookie?"

"He's a good cook, but Zachery had a grudge. Can you find a place for Cal Peabody?"

Redwood Jackson turned to Fred and Blackie and said, "Go get him. Bring him to the house and we'll find something for him to do."

Gene thanked the big red-faced man. Fred and Blackie started on their way while Redwood and Gene Autry moved off in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER SIX

THE SYNDICATE WAY

There was nothing fancy about Redwood Jackson's home. Though large and roomy, it was built of unskinned logs for utility and not, like Thaddeus Tyler's ranch house, for show. It had begun as a single room, but wings and sections had been added until it rambled over a wide area. There were all of twenty rooms, each one equipped with a huge stone fireplace. It housed a dozen guards, four handymen, and a Chinese cook called Woo Fang. In the rear there was a stable for the horses.

The guards, it developed, worked in shifts of eight hours. There were four guards on duty in the timber at all times. They were constantly on the alert for intruders and fires.

"Sit right there, Gene," invited Redwood Jackson. He chuckled and then explained, "I'll never forget how you handled those two hombres that thought they were so tough. You sure took 'em down a couple of pegs." He surveyed the younger man appraisingly. "I've heard a lot about you," he said. "I thought you'd be a man about seven feet tall an' tipping the scales at about three hundred pounds."

Gene grinned and said, "I've heard about you too, Jackson. I expected to find a man that ate raw meat and used iron nails for chewing gum."

Jackson laughed. "I guess I got a reputation for bein' a fire-eater," he said. "Ordinarily I've got a short temper, but the things that've been happenin' these past few weeks have made it even shorter. Today's the first time I've had a laugh in a long time."

"What's been going on in the redwood country?"

"What've you heard?"

"The syndicate's been using every means to get timberland. Is that right?"

"That," replied Jackson, "is a masterpiece of understatement. I know of at least five men that were squeezed right out of the land they owned without a dime to show for it."

"How's it done?"

"There're a dozen ways."

"For example?"

"Well," began Redwood Jackson. "In the case of Clem Archer, the syndicate sent a man to make an offer for his land. This man looked like a little, beat-down critter that didn't have a nickel to his name. He didn't say who sent him. He made Clem think that he was workin' on his own. He wanted to buy a little piece of land fer his home. That's what he told Clem."

Gene nodded. "Then what?"

"Well, this critter made a deal that was too good for Clem to turn down. He offered about ten times what the land and the timber was worth. Clem took him up on it an' they signed a land contract. Clem got two hundred dollars in cash money, an' he was to get the rest in ninety days. The deal was that the buyer would forfeit the land if he didn't pay the balance on the dot. Clem didn't see no more of the buyer for a couple of weeks. Then one morning a lot of men pulled in on his place. They had trucks an' pack mules, an' tools of every kind. They went to work, cuttin' timber. The squirt that bought the land was with them an' had a lawyer in tow!"

"I guess I know what happened," Gene said.

Redwood nodded. "It ain't hard to guess. They stripped the best timber off the land like a lot of locusts goin' through. They skidded the logs down the flume to land that was owned by the syndicate at the bottom of the hill. Clem argued an' fought, but it didn't do him no good at all. The buyer had a paper, givin' him the use of the place. The lawyers showed Clem that he didn't have a legal leg to stand on. Clem didn't stop there. He went to town an' got a court order, but by the time it could be served, the timber was gone."

"And Clem never got the balance that was due him?"

Redwood Jackson shook his head. "Not another dime. He still owns the land, but it's worthless now. There ain't anything left that's worth cuttin'! That double-dealin' syndicate got ten thousand dollars worth of timber for a two hundred dollar payment."

"And that," said Gene, "is just one of the tricks the syndicate is using."

Jackson nodded.

"How about this land of yours?"

"The men in the camp just across the Chicapoo River want it mighty bad."

"I know they do."

"Been doin' their level best to buy it from me. Made me all kinds of offers an' I turned 'em all down."

"Who made those offers? A man named Danahy?"

Redwood looked at Gene in surprise. "You know Steve Danahy?"

"I don't know him, but I've heard about him."

"Well, he's the one that made the offers. Made the last one yesterday. I turned him down an' told him to get off my land or I'd turn the dogs on him."

"Then what?"

"That's all."

"Why don't you want to sell?"

"I don't know as it's anyone's business whether I want to sell or not."

"You're not planning to cut the timber yourself, are you?" asked Gene.

"Nope. This timber ain't goin' to be cut. The way they're clearin' off the land around here, the day'll soon come when there won't be no big trees left outside the government preserves. Maybe I'm sentimental about these trees, but I'm not goin' to see 'em cut. Why, some o' these trees are older'n the calendar."

Gene Autry smiled and said, "I know just how you feel about them."

"I don't know whether you do or not," replied the other. He leaned back in his chair. A faraway look came into his eyes and he spoke slowly. "Y'see, I came into these mountains a good many years ago. I cut some trees to clear a piece of land an' built a house. This room we're sittin' in was the original house. I cut every one of the logs in these walls with my own two hands. Trimmed 'em an' notched 'em, an' put 'em in place. Then I chinked 'em an' built that there fireplace. When it was all done, I brought my new wife here to live. My two boys were born in this room. When they got older, I added to the house—built a couple of wings so's we'd have more room. The war came along—the last war I mean, in 1917. I went across and spent a year in the trenches in France. All durin' that year I kept thinkin' about this place in the redwoods an' the folks that were

waitin' here for me. When the war ended, I was mighty grateful to have this place to come home to."

Jackson paused and for several minutes looked at the floor of the room. "Mary died in this room," he said softly. "She died lookin' out the window at the redwood trees. That was ten years ago. My boys grew up to be fine men. They're away from home now. Dunno how long they'll be away, but every time I hear from them, they ask about our trees. They're lookin' forward to comin' back here, the same as I did. I aim to keep this place until they get back. After I'm dead an' gone, they'll have the land an' the trees an' they can do what they've a mind to with 'em." The hard old man looked at Gene. "So that's why I won't sell out to the syndicate or anyone else."

"I sure hope you can hang on to this place," Gene said. "I've reason to think that Zachery will make a play to drive you out."

"How d'you mean?"

"I don't know." Gene told about Cal Peabody—how he had overheard the tag end of a conversation in the syndicate office. "Zachery said he'd make one more offer and if you didn't take it, you'd be sorry. That might have been just idle talk, but I'm inclined to think there was something to it."

Jackson nodded soberly. "I know what that pack of crooks did to Sam Slavin," he said.

"What's that?"

"They tried to buy out his lumberin' camp and he told 'em to go fly a kite. Then things started happening in Sam's camp. A couple of his mules died sudden. It looked like poison, but it couldn't be proved. His flumes got smashed, cables snapped, machinery broke down, trees fell the wrong way an' hurt a few of the men, and a dozen other accidents happened. There wasn't any way to prove that the syndicate was behind all those things, but everyone knows that the accidents stopped sudden when Sam sold out."

"Have you any idea how many men there are in the syndicate camp?"

Redwood Jackson said, "Somewhere between a hundred an' a hundred an' twenty."

Gene's eyes widened. "That's a pretty big outfit to fight."

Jackson shook his head. "Wouldn't have to fight 'em all," he said. "Three-fourths of those men are just plain lumberin' men that work for so much a day an' found. They'll do the job they're paid for an' do it right. But they won't tackle any extra shenanigans."

"Are you sure of that?"

Jackson nodded. "Yep," he said. "If it came to an out-an'-out fight between the syndicate an' me, most of the men in the camp would keep out of it. They

wouldn't take sides at all. The only trouble is, there's no way of knowin' what kind of under-handed tricks that syndicate outfit will use next."

For several minutes both men were silent, each wrapped in his respective thoughts. Redwood Jackson broke the silence with a question. "Look here, Gene, just what do you figure you can do in this country."

"I'm hoping to get evidence that the syndicate is using extortion methods to build a monopoly. If I can get that evidence and find out who the head man of the syndicate is, I'll pass the information along to the right authorities and there'll be some wings clipped."

"If you can do that," Jackson said seriously, "there'll be a lot of men in these mountains who'll be everlastingly grateful to you."

CHAPTER SEVEN

MIDNIGHT OIL

Darkness gathered over the redwoods and shrouded the camp of the syndicate on the northern side of the Chicapoo River. In the bunkhouse men slept deeply. The costly machinery of lumbering was silent. Ordinarily there would have been no lights in the camp, but this night was an exception. A council of war was being held in the syndicate office.

The ruddy glow of oil lamps reflected from the greasy face of a thin-lipped, beetle-browed man named Zachery. His lean, claw-like fingers traced lines on a large map that covered the top of a big table. "Right here," he said, "is the Chicapoo River. That's the dividin' line between the land we control an' the land that Redwood Jackson owns."

"I know all that," replied Steve Danahy impatiently. "Don't waste time telling me things I already know. Get to the details you've worked out." Danahy was a short, stocky individual who affected a silk scarf about his throat instead of a necktie. His hair was thin and slicked close to his head.

Vince Zachery cracked a match into flame with the nail of his thumb and touched the fire to a

drooping cigarette. "I don't want tuh bore you," he said with a touch of sarcasm, "but I gotta go through the thing from the start so's it'll be clear. Now if yuh don't mind, Danahy, I'll proceed with the outline of my plans."

"Go ahead," snapped Danahy.

"As I was sayin', the Chicapoo River divides the land. Now that Chicapoo is a downright peculiar river in a good many ways. In the spring it overflows the banks an' spreads out over the valley for as much as a quarter of a mile. That makes a pretty wide space on both sides of the stream where there's no timber growin'."

"What of it? How does that help us get Redwood Jackson's land?"

"I'm comin' tuh that," said Zachery. "Now let's suppose there was a fire in Jackson's timber. That wide stretch of open land would be a pretty good protection for us, wouldn't it?"

"Why're you talkin' about a fire in the Jackson timber?"

"It's likely to happen," replied Zachery with a sly wink.

"Don't be a fool, Zachery. It's not the Jackson land we want. It's the timber. My job is to get timber, not burned-over land. If that's the best you can do in the way of an idea, forget it and we'll turn in and get some sleep."

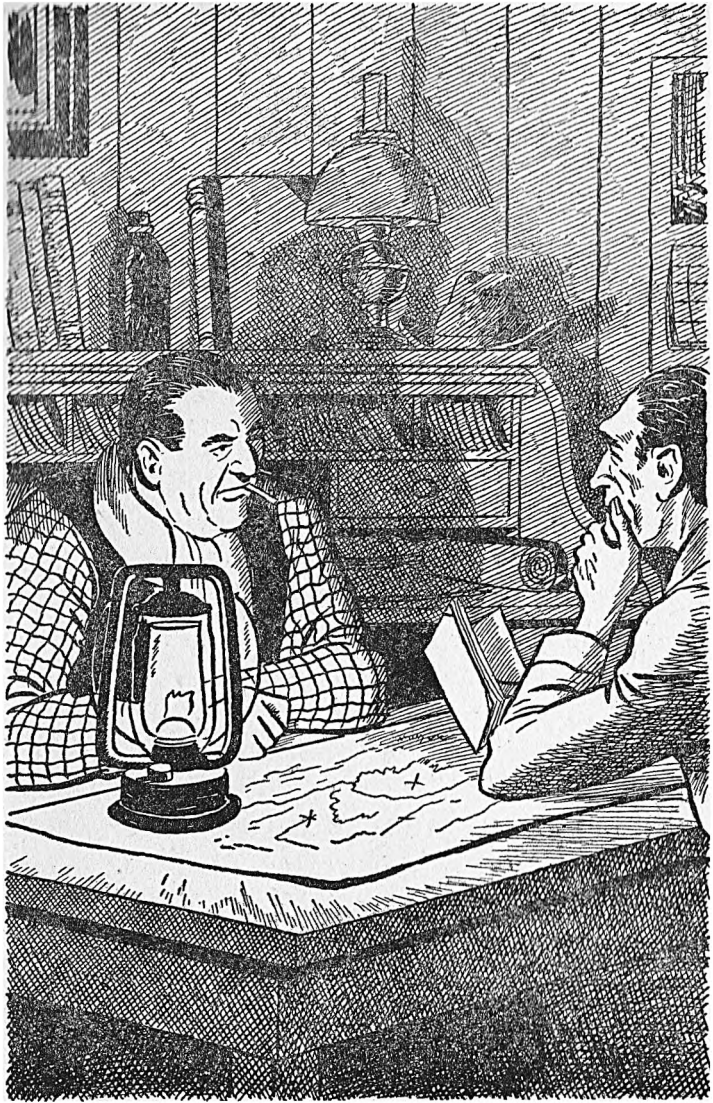
"Now hold on. Hold yer horses, Danahy." Zachery went to a desk near the wall and shoved up the roll top. From a drawer he extracted a small black notebook and thumbed through a few pages. "Look here," he said, returning to the table. "There's at least fifteen pieces of timberland that we're tryin' to buy. I've got 'em all noted down here. A whole page to each one of 'em." Danahy glanced at the notebook. "I've made notes as to the progress we've made on each one of those dèals," Zachery explained. "In every one of 'em we're at a standstill. All our offers have been turned down flat."

"I know that! I've been getting bawled out by letter nearly every time the mail comes in. The big boss is getting tired of waiting for us to close these deals."

"He's goin' to get a lot more tired of waitin' if we don't do somethin' drastic mighty soon," retorted Vince Zachery. "If we don't take steps, we're goin' to get nothin' at all. If we do something that'll let these holdouts know that they'd better accept our deals, we may get someplace."

"Let's hear more about your plans," said Danahy.

"They're simple enough. We burn Jackson's timber. That's all. Wipe him out. Then we call on these other men an' let 'em know that the timber is mighty dry an' there's likely to be more fires. We can be slick about it. We'll let 'em know we mean business,



"Let's Hear More About Your Plans," Said Danahy

but we won't give 'em any proof they can use against us."

"There's just one thing wrong with your plan," Steve Danahy said.

"There ain't a darned thing wrong with it. I've got it all worked out to the last detail. What's more, I've got the men all set to help me."

"I still say there's one thing wrong with your plan."

"What?"

"We've got a hundred men in this camp that'd fight a fire in any timber. If Jackson's trees got burnin', our men would rush over there an' fight the fire."

"It wouldn't do no good to tell 'em to let it burn?" asked Zachery.

"Where in thunder would that put us?" snapped Danahy. "Those men are just drifters. They're not on the inside track of our deals. If we let 'em know that we wanted the Jackson timber to burn out, they'd raise hob with us. Then they'd go an' fight the fire anyway. What's more, they'd see the flames as soon as the trees got started. They'd be there in plenty of time to put the fire out before it got much of a head start."

An evil grin spread over Zachery's face, exposing yellow, tobacco-stained teeth. "Now," he said to Danahy, "you'll see how well I've taken care of all

the details. I thought of that angle."

"Well?"

"I figured that those men might go an' fight the fire, an' I got plans to prevent it."

"Go on."

"The Chicapoo River, as I said before, is a down-right peculiar stretch of water. Sometimes it's low an' sometimes it's high."

"And sometimes it overflows the banks," finished Danahy in an impatient voice. "What of it?"

"Right now that river is full up an' movin' fast. Movin' mighty fast, in fact. The water's white on top with the speed of movin' an' it's deep too. There ain't no man that could swim across the water. It's movin' too fast. He'd have his brains knocked out against the rocks."

"There you go again, telling me things I know as well as you do."

"The only way to get from here to the Jackson land is by crossin' the bridge. Now if the bridge wasn't there, what chance would any of our men have of helpin' fight that fire?"

"You mean—" began Danahy.

Zachery nodded proudly. "I plan to get rid of the bridge before I start the fires. Then where'll Jackson be? He'll be trapped in his own timber an' it'll be the hottest gol-darned trap that any man ever got caught in."

Danahy mused for several moments. Then he spoke softly and slowly. "Zachery, do you think it could be handled that way?"

"Why not?"

Danahy thumbed the black notebook. "If there was a fire that wiped out the Jackson land," he muttered, "I'll bet ten to one that I can close at least half the deals in this notebook."

"Then you like the scheme I got worked out?"

"It would be a good one," Danahy said, "if nothing went wrong. On the other hand, if we slipped up anywhere along the line, we'd be gone geese." He reached into the pocket of his shirt and drew out a long envelope that had been folded across. "I've got a letter here," he said. "It might change your mind about the plans."

"Who's the letter from?"

"The Boss."

"What's he say?"

"There's a gent on the way that might put a few crimps in our plans. His name's Gene Autry."

Zachery gave a low, exclamatory whistle. "Autry," he echoed. "Who sent him up here an' why is he comin'?"

"I don't know who sent him, but he's comin'" to check up on things."

"He'd better not check up too close to me," growled Zachery. "I might make him wish he'd

never seen big timber."

"You an' what army?" sneered Danahy. "Don't talk so big unless you can back it up."

"I'll back my talk! Autry may be a tough man in the cattle country. He may've nailed a few cow thieves an' smugglers an' he may've done some housecleanin' in a few towns, but he ain't at home in big timber. On the other hand, I'm on the home lot. If Autry tries to interfere with me, I'll show him some fightin' tricks that he never heard of! Lumberin' machinery an' big timber make mighty good weapons if a man knows how to use 'em."

"Well, it's up to you, Zachery. At least you know what you're up against."

"I'm up against Gene Autry. That means nothin' tuh me. On the other hand, Gene Autry is up against Vince Zachery. That'll mean *aplenty* to him!"

CHAPTER EIGHT

CHICAPOO BRIDGE

Gene Autry was awake at dawn. He climbed out of bed, shivering in the cold morning air. He swung his arms vigorously, then hurriedly washed and dressed. He was strapping on his gunbelt as he left the bedroom.

Redwood Jackson sat before a breakfast of beefsteak and potatoes, huge mugs of coffee, and hot rolls that Woo Fang had prepared. "Sit right down and fall to," he said to Gene. "If you don't think Woo Fang is the best cook this side of the Rockies, you don't know good cookin'."

Gene grinned and unfolded a napkin as the smiling Chinaman came from the kitchen with a sizzling steak.

"Hey, Woo," began Jackson, as the Oriental placed Gene's plate on the table, "in all the years you've been here, you never came up with biscuits like these. Is it somethin' new you just learned?"

"It new to me," replied the cook. "Woo Fang not make blisklit. New man make blisklit."

"New man?"

Woo nodded. "Man who come in last night," he explained. "Name Cal."

"Cal Peabody!" exclaimed Gene. "That's who he's talking about."

"I'd forgotten all about him," Jackson said. "If this is a sample of his work in the kitchen, I guess I'll have to have two cookies on my payroll from now on."

Gene noticed that his host was dressed for action. That is to say, he wore business-like spurs on the heels of his boots, and a gunbelt around his waist. Meanwhile, Jackson saw that Gene had strapped on his guns. "What're your plans for the day?" he asked.

Gene said, "I'm leaving here right after we finish breakfast. I'm going across the Chicapoo River and have a little conference with a couple of men in the syndicate camp."

"A conference, eh?"

Gene nodded grimly. "I don't know just where it'll end."

"What're you goin' to talk about?"

"I don't know that either."

Jackson buttered a piece of roll and popped it into his mouth. "You can't go over there an' make charges against the syndicate without something in the way of proof to back the charges. Or can you?"

Gene shook his head and said, "I can't."

"You can't bluff men like Danahy and Zachery either. Those men don't bluff worth a cent. If any-

one tries to throw a bluff on them, they'll call him every time."

"Men who can be bluffed don't get far in country like this," Gene commented. "I don't intend to try any bluffing game. I thought I'd talk to those two and stir them up a little. Sometimes a situation like this is a lot like a hunter's stew. If you stick a spoon in it and give it a quick stir, a lot of things will come to the surface."

Jackson grinned at the comparison. "Things," he said, "that you never suspected was down at the bottom of the kettle."

"That's the general idea," replied Gene Autry.

"Those plans suit me first rate," Redwood Jackson said with an emphatic nod. "That's about the way I figured you'd make your first play. I'm goin' along with you."

"You?"

"Yes. I know the way through the woods. There's a bridge across the Chicapoo and if you miss the bridge you might travel a good many miles findin' a place where you could cross the River. It's a roarin' river right now. Too deep for wadin' an' too fast for swimin'."

"I'll be glad to have your company as far as the bridge," Gene said, "but from there on, I'd better travel alone."

"You'd better *not* travel alone."

"Why?"

"The critters that work for Danahy and Zachery ain't like those overgrown jugheads that work for me. You won't get the chance to outwit the syndicate guards the way you did Fred an' Blackie. If you're alone, you might never see the men that figure to stop you. You might see nothin' at all before a bullet takes you between the shoulder blades."

"I don't think they'd go that far," Gene said.

"I know doggoned well they would! Especially if there's only one man, and especially if they happen to have found out that you're the one that's on the way to call."

"I don't quite follow you, Jackson."

"I'll tell you, Gene," Redwood went on; "you've got a reputation and a clean slate."

Gene looked somewhat bewildered. "Clean slate?"

"Yep. You've got a record that's just about a thousand per cent. Though I've heard a lot about you, I've never heard of you fallin' down on an assignment. You've got a name for gettin' the man or men you started out for. It's said that you never fail."

Gene laughed. "That just goes to show how the truth can be stretched by the spreading of rumors. I've failed a lot of times. Why, there was a situation in Amaranthe County just a couple of months ago—"

Jackson broke in. "That ain't the point," he said. "Whether you ever fell down on a job or not don't count. You've got a reputation for never fallin' down and that does count. Those buzzards north of the Chicapoo are downright afraid of you. They ain't goin' to take the chance of lettin' you get into their camp an' talk to them. Not if they can avoid it. They'll make a play to get you, Gene, an' they'll do it if you're travelin' alone."

"And face a murder charge?"

Jackson shook his sandy-haired head slowly. "They won't face no murder charge," he said slowly. "They'll handle things so it'll look like an accident. They're mighty good at that sort of thing."

"But they don't even know I'm in the vicinity."

"Like fun they don't."

"How can they?"

"Don't ask me how they know it. Just take it for granted that they do. They're gettin' reports all the time. They send a man into the post office for mail every day. You can bet your bottom dollar that they got word that you were headin' this way a long time before you got here. This syndicate is a big outfit an' well organized. Now don't give me no arguments about it, because nothin' you can say will change my mind. When you cross the Chicapoo, I'm crossin' with you. When you ride into the syndicate camp, I'm goin' to be alongside. Maybe I'm old enough

to be your father, but I'm still a pretty good hand with a six-gun."

"I sure appreciate your interest, Jackson. I guess I'd be mighty foolish to turn down your offer."

"Then we ride together?"

Gene Autry nodded.

The two men finished their hearty breakfast in silence and ate enough hot biscuits to make old Cal supremely happy.

In the stable they found that Champ and a long, rangy horse had been saddled and bridled. Gene inspected his gear and found everything cinched up and ready to go. After a few words of instruction to the men, Redwood Jackson nodded to Gene and said, "Whenever you give the word."

"Let's shove on."

It was an exhilarating ride through the cool morning. The air was tinged with the fragrance of the woods. It was so clean and sharp that it seemed to bite when Gene drew a deep breath. It was a morning that made one glad to be alive. Riding among the huge trees, Gene understood more and more clearly why Redwood Jackson looked upon those trees as associates and friends. Here and there he would point out certain trees that had played a specific part in his life. Trees that had witnessed a lesson he'd given one of his sons; trees beneath which he and his young wife, in the distant past,

had made plans for the future. "It was under that there tree," he said pointing to a rugged-looking old patriarch, "that I kissed Mary good-by when I went to the war. If you go close you can see where I carved the date in it."

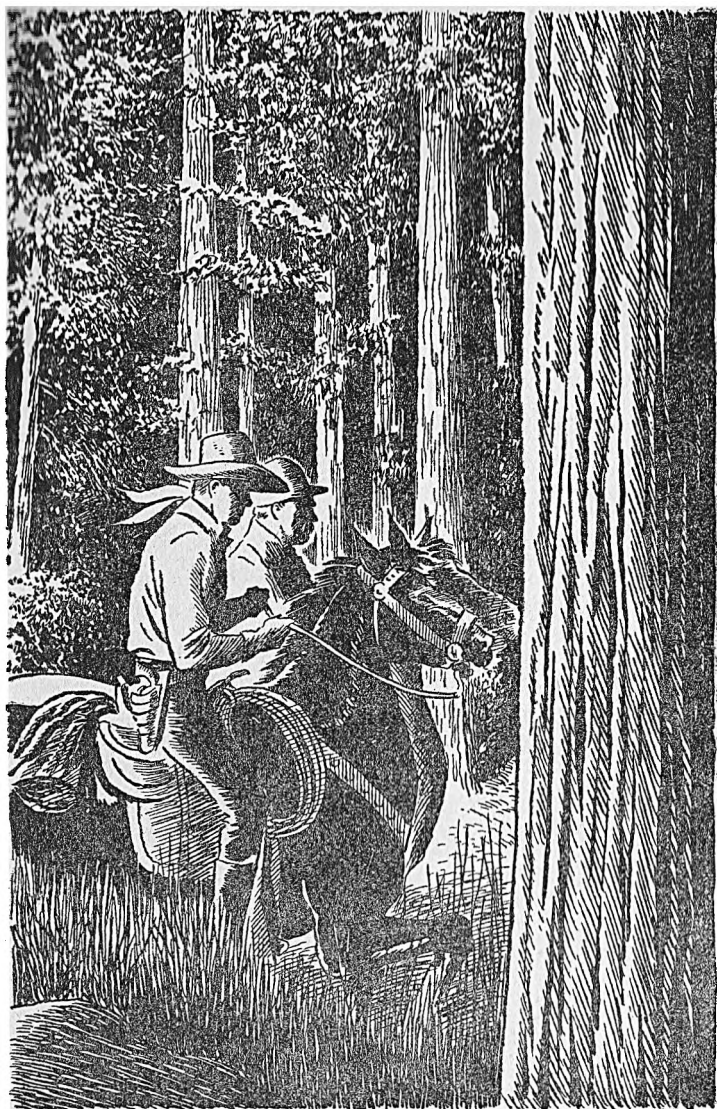
The old man's eyes got that faraway look again. "We made a sort of a deal," he said. "We agreed that if somethin' happened an' I didn't come back from the war, Mary'd come to that tree every year on the tenth of April. She'd sit there an' if there was any way that I could send her a message from the hereafter, I'd send it to her. I reckon that was a sort of foolish thing, but we were young and foolish in those days."

"I don't think it was foolish at all," replied Gene.

Half an hour of riding brought the horsemen to a break in the forest. The ground ahead dipped gently, then rose on the other side of the Chicapoo River. The valley was covered with small, stunted growth, mostly shrubs and wild grass. The Chicapoo, flowing through the center of the valley, was a raging torrent that gave out a roar of defiance and warning.

"In the spring," Redwood Jackson explained, "the river comes over the banks an' sometimes widens out to cover this whole valley."

Gene nodded. "The way it looks," he said, "it wouldn't take much more water to make it over-



They Rode Among the Huge Trees

flow right now."

"It's higher than usual. You can see that there'd be precious little hope of crossing if the bridge wasn't there."

Gene noticed the bridge for the first time. It lay off to the right a few hundred yards. "Your land ends at the river?" he asked.

"Yep. An' the land the syndicate owns starts at the north bank of the river. The river's the dividin' line."

The bridge was simply constructed. It consisted of a few timbers, deeply set in the banks of the stream. These supported crossbeams over which wide planks had been placed and spiked down. There were no side rails. There was, in fact, nothing fancy or superfluous about the bridge. It was crude but it seemed to be solid enough to support an army, and wide enough for a large wagon and team to cross.

Of course neither Gene nor Redwood Jackson could know the bridge had already been doomed to destruction—and that within a few minutes!

CHAPTER NINE

BRIDGE BLOWERS

If Gene Autry had only known what Vince Zachery had done before he and Redwood Jackson reached the Chicapoo Bridge, he would have made drastic changes in his plans. Instead of riding for a conference with the representatives of the lumber syndicate, groping for some tangible evidence of foul play, the special deputy would have launched into direct action and prevented a great deal of damage and suffering.

But naturally Gene had no way of knowing that Zachery had called a few well chosen men together before daybreak. The lean-faced schemer had outlined his intentions with a few words, then ridden out of the lumbering camp before the sun broke through the early morning haze.

Zachery and three other men reached the bridge an hour ahead of Gene and Redwood Jackson. They crossed to the Jackson property and dismounted.

"As far as I can learn," Zachery told his men, "Jackson has twelve men guardin' his timber. They work in shifts, so that means that there's only four men on the job at one time. Those men work in pairs, so you shouldn't have much trouble keepin'

out of their sight."

"If we happen tuh run across the guards, we'll deal with 'em in short order." Lefty Bates, the speaker, tapped his gun significantly. The handle of that gun had been notched five times. Each of those notches was a grim memento that told of a man with whom Lefty had dealt in the past.

"You watch yourself," warned Zachery. "We don't want the law to get evidence against anyone in the pay of the syndicate."

"No one's ever got evidence against me," boasted Lefty. "And no one ever will."

"We don't want evidence of murder! It won't do for any of the Jackson men to be found with a bullet hole in their hide."

"Don't worry. If me an' Jake have to gun someone, he won't be found with or without a bullet hole. We'll put the remains in a place that'll be burned over good an' proper!"

Zachery nodded and turned to the man called Jake. "You got everything you need?"

Jake took inventory of the load on the back of his riding horse and a pack mule. "Plenty of oil," he muttered, "some hunks of blastin' fuse, an' a supply of matches. I don't see as we'll need anythin' else."

"Food?" queried Zachery.

Jake nodded. "Lefty's carryin' the grub, ain't you, Lefty?"

"Yep."

"Now remember," Zachery said. "You're to get the oil spread in half a dozen places. Run a long line of fuse into the oil an' light it. You light the longest fuse first, then the next longest, and so on. If you do it right, fires'll break out in half a dozen places at just about the same time. After you've got the fuses lighted, you just keep ridin' south. Cross the Jackson land an' keep goin'."

"I'd like it better if we could go back to the camp," muttered Lefty.

"Well, you can't. By the time you get the fires started, there'll be no bridge left. You'll have to keep goin'." Zachery drew a roll of bills from his pocket and slipped off the rubber band that held it together. "I'll pay you two right now," he said. "Then you won't have to worry about collectin'."

As he counted off bills of large denomination, Zachery said, "Don't you two get any double-cross ideas. I'm payin' you before you do your job, because there ain't no other way to handle it. But if you don't start those fires, we'll find you an' take back this cash. What's more, we'll take it back with *interest*, and it will come out of your hides."

Jake growled, "Don't worry. You'll get your fires." He stuffed the money in his pocket and said, "Let's get goin', Lefty." The two rode across the valley and disappeared in the forest.

Zachery turned to the remaining man and said, "Unload the stuff. We'll get things fixed an' then get back to the camp in time for breakfast."

It didn't take long to remove a couple of heavy wooden boxes from the remaining pack mule. Shifty Disbro lugged one of the boxes to the southern end of the bridge. He pried off the lid and tossed it into the water that boiled and foamed at his feet. He watched it disappear beneath the white bubbles, then reappear several yards downstream. With a small, short-handled spade Disbro dug a hole where the bridge met the turf. The dirt that he removed he tossed into the water so there would be no evidence visible for a casual observer.

Zachery, watching Disbro at work, said, "That's big enough. We don't have to bury the dynamite very deep."

"Don't want it to be seen by anyone."

"It won't be. The planks of the bridge will hide it." Zachery dropped to his knees and hauled the fifty-pound case into position. He slid it into the hole where it fitted neatly. "That'll do it," he said. "Now go dig a hole at the other end of the bridge while I fuse this stuff."

Squatting on his haunches, Zachery poked a hole into one of the soft, waxy sticks of dynamite with the sharp point of a stick about the size of a lead pencil. From a small box he drew a percussion cap.

Then he measured several feet of fuse and cut it from the coil that hung over the pommel of his saddle. The end of this fitted perfectly into the percussion cap and the cap slipped neatly into the prepared hole in the dynamite. By the time Zachery had finished fusing the explosive, the hole at the northern end of the bridge was ready. Disbro led the horses and the pack mule across the bridge while Zachery removed all traces of the work that had been done.

A second case of high explosive was planted and fused in the same manner as the first. "Now," Zachery said, "I guess we're set to go." He glanced at his watch. "The other boys have had time enough to get deep into the timber. We'll light up an' then we'll see some fireworks."

Disbro grinned. "I'll bet this bridge goes straight up for a hundred feet or more."

"We'll soon know. Wait right here until I light the other fuse, then we'll light this one and take to cover."

Zachery crossed the bridge and lighted the fuse on Jackson's side. Then he touched fire to the second fuse. A moment later the two were safely concealed behind a large boulder on the northern edge of the Chicapoo Valley. It was just then that Gene Autry and Redwood Jackson broke from the timber and headed for the bridge.

CHAPTER TEN

THE BLAST

As Gene Autry and Redwood Jackson neared the bridge the sound of the Chicapoo River became a deafening roar. The turbulent water was a seething, bubbling mass of white foam as it lashed huge rocks that studded the stream.

"You see why the bridge is important," Jackson said. "That river's only about forty feet across, but it's the roughest stretch of water you ever saw! A man wouldn't have a chance of swimmin' to the other side."

"How deep is it?" asked Gene.

"Well, when the water is down to normal level, it's about eight feet deep with a couple of feet of bank risin' on each side above the water. Now the water's right up to the bank. I'd say it must be about ten feet deep."

Gene nodded absently. Something else had caught his sharp eye. "Rein up here for a minute," he said.

"You needn't worry about the bridge. It don't look like much, but it's plenty solid."

"I wasn't thinking about the bridge, Jackson. I was thinking about some footprints." Gene pointed

to the ground near the end of the bridge. "Look there," he said. "There've been men and horses here since daybreak."

Jackson frowned at the ground. "How d'you know they've been here that recent?" he asked.

"Watch the grass. It's been pressed down within the last half hour." Even as the two men watched, the long blades of grass moved slowly toward the perpendicular.

"Some of that grass," said Gene, "was broken. Some was merely bent down. The bent-down grass is springing back."

"I don't like this," grumbled Redwood Jackson. "Anyone that comes from the far side of the river is from the camp of the syndicate. That means they ain't no friends of mine. Cut some more sign, Gene, an' tell me what else you see."

Gene studied the ground without dismounting. After a moment's scrutiny he said, "There were several horses here. Some of them went back across the bridge, and some went on to your timber." He pointed toward the Jackson trees. "You can see three sets of tracks moving over that way," he said. "Offhand I'd guess that two horses were ridden and one was led."

"They ain't got no business in my timber," stated Jackson. "I told 'em to keep off this side of the river an' keep out of that forest."

"It's possible that the men who rode those horses are just travelers, heading for the town and taking the most direct route," Gene Autry suggested.

"It's also possible," snapped Jackson, "that they're somethin' else. I hanker to know who they are an' where they're goin'. I wish we didn't have to go to that syndicate camp right now. I'd like to follow those tracks for a little ways."

"You follow them," Gene said. "I'll go on to the camp alone."

Redwood removed his broad-brimmed hat and scratched his head in deep thought. "I dunno," he muttered. "I hate to let you go on alone. I told you why."

"I think you overestimated the danger," Gene said. "I don't think anyone will shoot me on sight."

"I didn't overestimate the danger. It's possible that I underestimated your ability to take care of yourself though." After a pondering pause, Jackson spoke again. "I sure would like to know who made those tracks."

"So would I," Gene replied. "Go on and follow them. I'll shove on to the camp and talk to the men there. Then I'll return and tell you what happened."

During the conversation tiny wisps of blue smoke issued from the sparking fuse beneath the planking of the bridge. With the attention of both Gene and Jackson concentrated on the horse tracks, these faint

wisps went unnoticed. Meanwhile two pairs of eyes watched from the shelter of a rock a hundred yards away. Zachery and Disbro were tense. They knew that the fuse was burning short, that at any instant there might be two thunderous blasts that would shake the ground and destroy the bridge. They knew that those explosions would be fatal to the men who sat their horses.

They weren't concerned with the lives that were threatened. They were, however, fearful that one of the two men might notice the smoke from the fuse and take steps to prevent the explosions. But these fears were unfounded.

"I'll do what you say," Jackson finally decided. "I'll go an' follow that trail while you go on to the camp."

Gene said, "Good." While Jackson rode away south, he turned Champ's nose north and started across the bridge.

Let it be said in favor of Disbro that he would have shouted a warning to Gene Autry if he had had his way. He started to leap from behind the rock, but found his arm gripped in the lean-fingered clutch of Vince Zachery. "What's the matter with you?"

"He's right on the bridge! He'll be blown to bits!"

"What of it?" snapped Zachery. "He ain't one of our men."

"What's the difference who he is? I didn't contract to blow a man up with the bridge. Lemme yell for him to hurry an' get away."

"An' let him know that we're the hombres that planted that blast? Don't be a fool." Zachery's fingers bit into Disbro's arm. "Anyhow, he's crossed the bridge. He—"

The rest of Zachery's speech was lost in the roar of exploding dynamite. The far end of the bridge seemed to leap into the air. For an instant the structure stood on end. And then the second case of dynamite exploded.

The ground trembled and the roar was deafening. Great clouds of yellowish smoke shot into the sky together with chunks of splintered wood and huge sections of the bridge. As the roar subsided the shrill whinnies of a horse in terror sounded from the clouds of smoke. Then there was a thudding as the debris rained down on both sides of the stream.

Gene Autry hardly knew whether he was among the living or the dead. In the wild confusion he instinctively fought to calm the fears of the great horse, Champ. He spoke, hardly aware of what he said. "Steady, Champ, steady there, boy, we're all right," he shouted as the horse reared high. "Steady there, we're all right!"

Even as he spoke he felt a stunning blow on his left shoulder. A large piece of falling timber caught



"Steady, Champ, We're All Right."

him a glancing blow. His whole left side went numb and for a few seconds he had to fight to remain in the saddle. The world had suddenly gone chaotic for the man and the horse. Champ plunged and reared, whinnying shrilly above the rider's cries. Gene felt for a moment as if he were about to lose consciousness. His brain whirled and he saw a million brilliant dancing lights.

Then he heard his own voice, shouting to the horse. Gradually Champ's fears subsided and the horse calmed down. There was silence, broken only by the steady rumble of white water a short distance away.

Gene looked back. Where the bridge had been, there was nothing but the stumps that had been sunk into the ground on each side of the Chicapoo. "I—I guess we're lucky to be alive," he muttered to Champ. "I'd better dismount and take stock of the situation."

It was characteristic of Gene that he examined his horse before the thought of his own injury. He went over the big animal carefully, making sure that none of the falling wood had injured Champ. Then he turned his attention to his own wound. He felt of his shoulder gingerly and examined the shirt for signs of red. "I guess the skin wasn't torn," he muttered. He swung his arm. It hurt at first, but in a few moments he felt reassured. The blow had

been a painful one, but no serious damage had been done.

"Champ," he said, "that blast is going to call for the answer to a few questions when we get to the syndicate camp. That was set there for some reason. I'm going to make someone talk!"

He was about to remount when he saw two men approaching. Both Zachery and Disbro had their guns drawn and pointed at Gene Autry. As they came near, Zachery said, "Hoist 'em, stranger."

Gene lifted his hand to shoulder level and waited calmly.

When Zachery came close, he said, "You nearly got caught in your own trap, didn't yuh, mister?"

"My trap?"

Zachery nodded. "I guess the boss will want to know about this. He'll be downright glad to see that we captured the hombre that blew up the bridge."

Gene said, "You think I fired that blast?"

Zachery nodded and replied, "We know you did."

A trace of a smile, grim and humorless, crossed Gene's lips. "That's a surprising statement," he said.

Zachery's next speech was even more surprising. "We know you fired it, stranger, because me an' Disbro saw yuh do it! We saw yuh light the fuse at this side of the bridge while Redwood Jackson lighted the fuse at the other side. I reckon that'll call for some explanation by you."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE SYNDICATE CAMP

Gene made no resistance when Vince Zachery disarmed him. The fact that Zachery had lied when he said he saw Gene and Jackson set the blasts was sufficient proof that Zachery himself was the one responsible for destroying the bridge. This was a fact that Gene stored away in his mind for future use. Zachery's plan was obvious. He would take the captured man to the kingpin in the syndicate camp and tell a trumped-up story that would be calculated to place the guilt on Gene. So, inasmuch as Gene wanted, above all else, to meet the man in charge of the camp, he permitted himself to be taken prisoner.

Zachery, leading the pack mule, rode on the right side of Champ while Disbro kept a close watch on the prisoner's opposite side. There was little conversation during the ride through the timber to the lumber camp. It was a slow ride and Gene had ample opportunity to observe the various phases of a well-equipped camp. He saw the air-saw men, who cut the logs to shorter lengths before passing them on to the peelers. The peelers, with the broad axes, stripped the bark from the underside of the

logs before rolling them on toward the flume to be skidded downhill to the mill. He saw the drivers with their mules, dragging the logs to the camp, the scaler with his stick, and the swamper.

Before the door of the office Zachery reined up and signaled for Gene Autry to dismount. "We'll see what Steve Danahy has tuh say about you," he promised.

Gene welcomed the chance to meet Steve Danahy face to face. He had been told about Danahy. It was Danahy who was supposed to have used various underhanded means to get control of desirable property. Danahy was the man that Gene had planned to ask about the syndicate's operations. Now he was to have the chance to size the man up.

Danahy sat before a roll-top desk. He turned in the swivel chair as Zachery opened the door and pushed Gene into the one-room building. "Who's this?" he demanded.

"He's a dynamiter," replied Zachery. "Me an' Disbro caught him in the act of blowin' up the Chicapoo Bridge."

A curious expression came into Danahy's eyes. "Is that true?" he demanded of Gene.

"Of course not. I rode over the bridge on the way to see you. Just as I got to this side, there was an explosion."

"You needn't believe a word he says," broke in

Vince Zachery. "Disbro will back me in what I say. This critter lit the fuse to some dynamite that he'd planted on this side of the river an' at the same time Redwood Jackson fired the fuse on the other side of the bridge. The bridge is gone."

Danahy nodded. "I guess it's the word of two men that I know I can trust against the word of a stranger," he said.

"You know you can trust these two?" Gene asked.

Danahy said, "Yes. They've worked for me for a long time."

"In that case, I can believe all the stories I've heard about you," Gene said coolly. "There's just one question that I'd like to get answered. I'd like to know why you had these two destroy the bridge."

"Why I had them destroy it?" snapped Danahy, an angry glow coming into his eyes.

Gene said, "Don't try to bluff me, Danahy. I know a lot about the stunts you've done to get control of timberland. How is the loss of the bridge going to help you get the Jackson property?"

"Why, you—" sputtered Danahy. "Are you implying that I—"

"I'm not implying anything," interrupted Gene. "I'm stating facts."

Danahy motioned to the door. Zachery nodded and kicked it shut. "Now," he said, "we can get tough with this hombre, eh, Boss?"

"Have you any suggestions?" asked Danahy.

"Yeah. I've always got suggestions," replied Zachery with a grin. "I think it'd be downright slick if we made this gent sign a confession that he blew up the bridge. Then we can deal with him right here on the spot an' the case'll be closed."

"Just how do you expect to force me to sign my name to such a confession?"

"Oh, that won't be so hard. There's a lot o' tricks that can be used to make a man welcome sudden death."

"Torture," breathed Gene Autry.

Zachery nodded grimly. To Danahy he said, "This man's comin' along at just the right time sort of helps us out. We can use him as the one tuh take the blame, can't we?"

Danahy looked uncertain. He shifted his weight uneasily in the chair and wiped beads of perspiration from his round face. "I don't know," he muttered. "I don't like the idea of torture."

"I didn't think you'd draw the line at anything," Gene said.

"We gotta get rid of him," stated Zachery. "He came along in time to learn the truth. We can't let him go. He's got tuh die."

Danahy nodded. He looked at Gene and said, "I'm afraid Zachery is right."

Zachery went on. "We can't kill him without

cause. We gotta have some sort of signed confession, or at least some proof that he set off the blast. If we got that, we can kill him an' say that we shot him as he tried to escape. That'll be easy. We can tell the law we captured him, an' we aimed tuh hold him until we could turn him over tuh the law. Then he broke for freedom an' we shot. Won't that account for killin' him?"

"Maybe so," agreed Steve Danahy. "What's his name?"

Zachery shook his head. "I dunno," he said. "We didn't take the time to question him. Chances are he'd lie about his name anyhow."

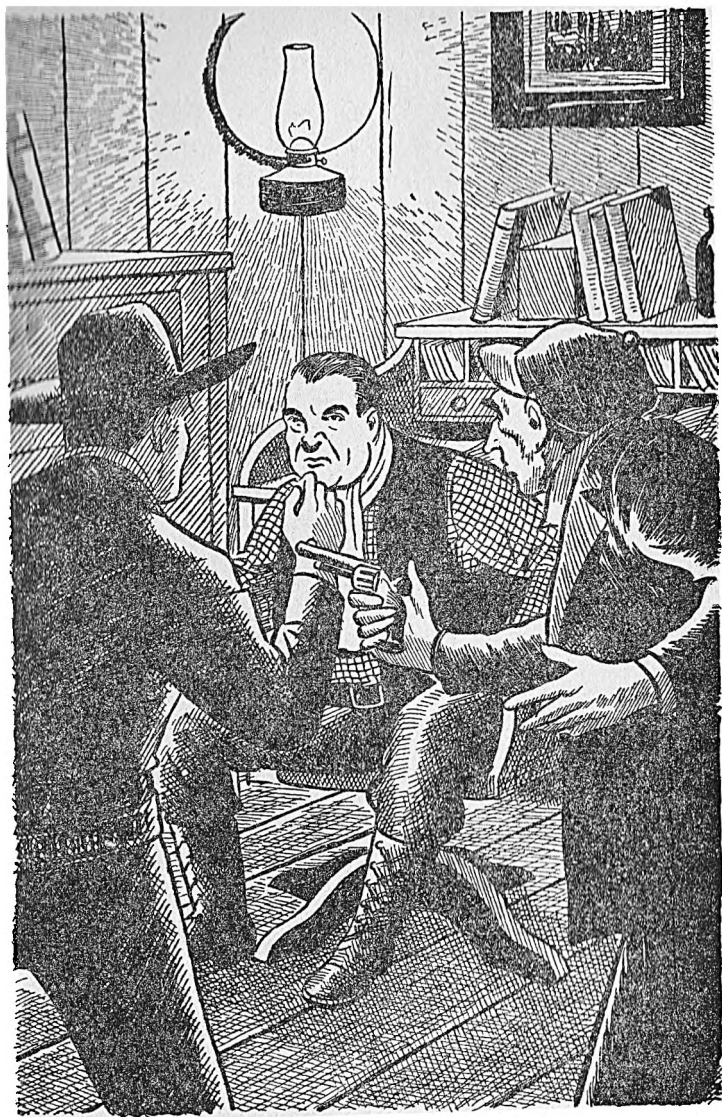
"That's where you're wrong," Gene put in. "I wouldn't lie about it. There's no reason to do that."

"Well," Danahy snapped, "what is your name?"

"Gene Autry."

It was a simple statement, simply made, but the effect on the three men who were in the office with Gene was tremendous. Disbro gasped and echoed the name. Zachery's jaw dropped and his eyes went wide as he stared at the speaker. Steve Danahy's face lost its redness as the blood drained and left him pale. "Did you say," Danahy barked, "that you're *Gene Autry*?"

"That's the name I've always used," Gene said. "It's a pretty good name. There's no reason to use anything different."



"Well, What Is Your Name?"

Danahy swung to face Zachery. "You stupid, bungling, squint-eyed fool," he fumed. "That's a fine idea you had. A *fine* idea! All we have to do is make Autry sign a confession to the effect that he blew up the bridge with malice aforethought. Then we turn that paper over to the law and say that we shot Autry when he tried to escape. Why you skinny, buzzard-eyed idiot! Who do you think is going to believe such tripe?"

Zachery's Adam's apple moved up and down in his lean throat as he swallowed hard. "I—I d-didn't know who he was," he faltered.

"You've put us in a swell situation! We can't let Autry stay alive with what he knows."

"But he don't know so much," argued Zachery in a thin voice. "He's got no proof of anything."

"He knows who blew the bridge, an' that's good enough! That one fact alone will be enough to put you and me behind the eight ball! We can't let him go and we can't kill him! Think of the questions that'd be raised if Autry died in this camp!"

Zachery was gradually regaining his composure. "Hold on a minute, Danahy," he said. "Now just hold yer horses. I said that I could take care of Autry an' I meant it. I'll handle this thing."

"How d'you expect to handle it?"

"What's to prevent havin' Autry meet up with an accident that we didn't have anything to do with?"

"We can arrange that easy enough."

"The first thing you'd better do," Danahy said, "is get some ropes on the prisoner!"

Zachery nodded agreement. "I'd have done it before if I'd known who he was," he said. "Got any rope here?"

Danahy said, "No. You go get some, Disbro."

Disbro left the office and closed the door. Danahy said, "We'll hold him here until we decide what we oughta do. We can do that after we see how the second part of your plan works out."

Gene Autry hadn't spoken since the announcement of his name. He was waiting, calculating his chances and making plans for a sudden break when the right instant was at hand. He measured the distance to his guns that Zachery had placed on a nearby table. He was about to take advantage of the fact that the odds against him were reduced while Disbro was out of the room when Danahy spoke of the second part of the plan.

What did that mean? Obviously the first part of the plan, whatever that was, meant the destruction of the bridge. Did Part Two have some connection with the footprints of the horses that Redwood Jackson had followed?

The answer came in the sudden clanging of a heavy triangle that hung on a rope suspended from a corner of the bunkhouse roof. The beating was

hard and sustained. A moment later the cries of men were added to the clamor. Gene caught the word, "Fire!" Someone nearer the window yelled, "It's the Jackson timber. It's on fire!"

There was a split second when the eyes of both Danahy and Zachery were turned toward the window. It was then that Gene Autry went into action.

He ducked low and to one side, throwing his weight against Vince Zachery. His compact, firmly knit body caught the lean man between the ankles and the knees and sent him sprawling. Gene hit the floor, rolling, and bounded to his feet near the table. As he came up his hands closed on the ivory handles of his guns.

Danahy was on his feet, reaching for a gun in the middle drawer of the desk. Gene fired. The explosion rocked the small building and the bullet smacked the desk drawer an inch from Danahy's hand. The kingpin leaped back with a startled exclamation.

Zachery, still on the floor, clawed for his gun. He didn't complete the draw. Gene was on him in an instant and rapped him squarely on the top of the head with the barrel of his forty-five. Zachery sighed deeply and slumped to the floor.

Then the door burst open. Disbro filled the opening with a number of men at his heels. He drew up sharply as he saw Gene waving a pair of pistols.

"Clear the way," Gene cried. "I'm coming out." Even as he spoke, he charged. Head down, his legs working like pistons, he hit the men in the doorway with the force of a battering ram. He was like an All-American back going through the line. Men's shouts of surprise were broken suddenly as Gene hit the group and sent it sprawling. He was through the door and in the clear.

He holstered his guns as he raced toward Champ. He expected that any moment would bring shots thundering in his direction, but no guns spoke. He leaped the last few yards. His left foot, reaching out ahead of him, found the stirrup. Champ was under way at the first touch. As Gene settled in the saddle, the big horse was in full flight. The shouts of the lumbermen and the fast tattoo of Champ's hoofs filled the air.

CHAPTER TWELVE

FIRE

After Redwood Jackson had left Gene Autry he followed the marks of horses into the virgin forest without difficulty for the first few minutes. Then his task became more difficult. As the leafy mat that covered the ground became thicker, the hoofmarks became more obscure. The spongy mold that had been built by layer upon layer of leaves was resilient and, after being pressed down by the weight of horses, sprang back to its original position.

Jackson was a good woodsman. He could cut sign as well as anyone, but his task wasn't easy. He had to dismount and keep close to the ground to see the hoofmarks. Even then there were times when he lost the trail. The men ahead made many turns, some of them at right angles. On these occasions Jackson lost precious minutes while he studied the ground in all directions before he could continue on his way.

He heard the blasts that destroyed the bridge. He paused, undecided as to whether he should continue on his way or turn back to learn the cause of the explosions. He decided to follow Gene Autry's plan and trail the men ahead, leaving all else to the

young deputy.

Though the trail wove in and out among the trees, its general direction was south, which took the trail-or and those he trailed deeper into the forest.

Then Redwood Jackson came upon something that sent him into a burning, all-consuming rage. At first he thought it was merely a pile of heaped up leaves. Then he saw a thread of smoke filtering from the mass. Smoke meant fire! And in that primeval forest, fire meant disaster. He plunged into the smoking leaves and kicked the pile apart. Then he saw the fuse! It was just the sort of fuse, about the size of clothesline, that the dynamiters in a lumber camp might use. And it was burning.

Dropping to his hands and knees, he jerked a knife from its sheath. He cut the slow fuse several inches from the lighted end, then dropped the cut-off section on a patch of damp moss where it could burn itself out harmlessly. Meanwhile he brushed away the leaves that covered the remainder of the fuse.

Instead of terminating in explosive, the end of the fuse dangled in a small can that had probably once held tomatoes or soup. The can was filled with a colorless fluid. "Gasoline," the old man muttered. The leaves that covered the can were saturated with the highly inflammable stuff. The ground for yards around was damp. Redwood sniffed the ground.

Gasoline had been poured over an area that covered several hundred square feet. If the tiniest spark had touched that sodden mass, flames would have leaped up instantly to start a fire that might spread to the entire forest.

For a moment Redwood Jackson was speechless. Then the full significance of his discovery struck him with stunning impact. He gave vent to his emotions in a scream of rage. He vowed that he'd find the men who set the fire and see that they were brought to justice. Then he went into action. His power of calm reasoning was gone. He was driven by a blind rage that demanded action of any sort. He leaped to the saddle and dug his spurs into his horse's flanks. The startled animal lunged forward.

Jackson ignored the trail that he'd been following. He raced ahead, oblivious to the perils of low branches that might sweep him from the saddle and high roots that might trip his horse. He rode for less than five minutes when the smell of wood smoke assailed his nostrils. He knew that smell and what it signified: it came from burning timber.

Through the trees Redwood Jackson saw smoke—great clouds of billowing smoke shot through with streaks of flame. When he reined up an instant later, wild panic seized his heart. His beloved forest was in flames! They were crackling, roaring flames that rose high above the tops of the tallest trees.

Jackson drew his gun and fired until the cylinder was empty. He reloaded and fired six more shots. He heard men shouting and turned to see half a dozen of his guards racing toward the fire with huge broadaxes and saws. Behind them came more men, leading mules that struggled under heavy loads.

Jackson took charge of things. Seizing one of the axes, he shouted directions as he attacked one of the near-by trees.

"The wind's blowing from the east," he cried. "Cut the trees that're in the line of the flames. Cut 'em down fast. It's our only hope of savin' the timber!"

On one of the mules there was blasting powder. This helped clear away the brush where the men worked. There were frequent booms of exploding powder, but these were almost drowned in the great roar of the flames.

When Jackson's keen-edged axe had notched the tree at which he'd been swinging, the frantic man made way for two strong men with a long buck saw. While this bit into the tree, Redwood started notching the next tree. There were other men at work on other trees.

Presently the forest monarchs started falling. The cry of "Timber-r-r" rang out. Men looked up, noted the line of fall, then waited for the crash.

It was a pitifully small group of fire-fighters that

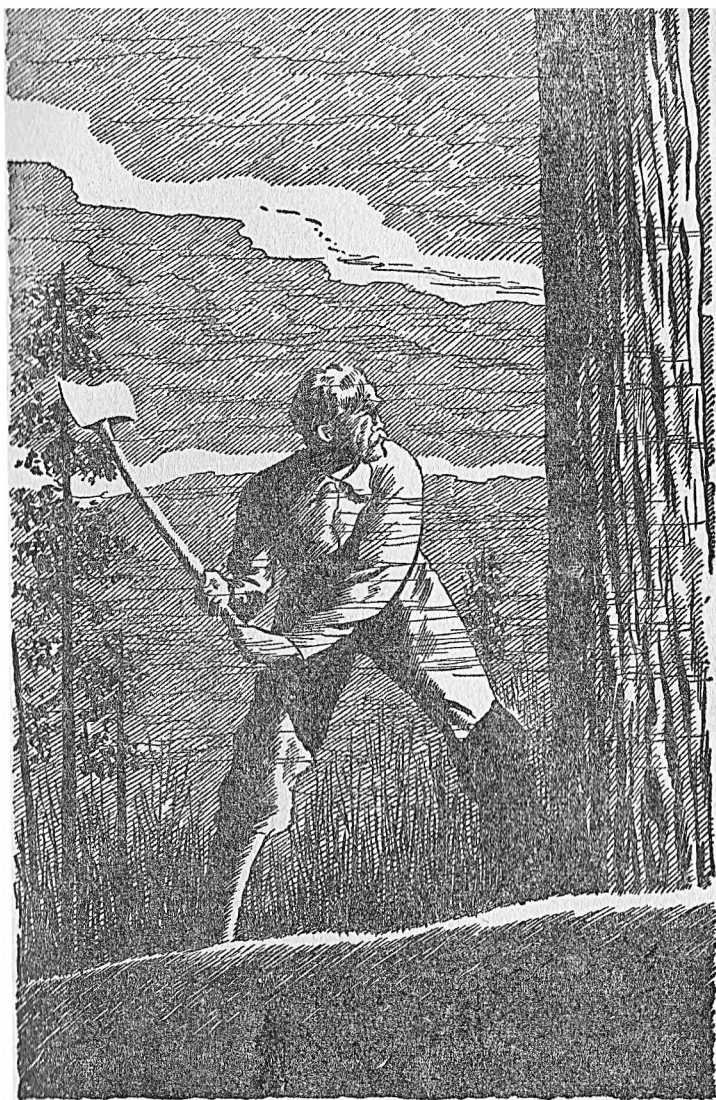
struggled with superhuman efforts to combat the flames. Each man knew that without help their task was hopeless. They fought to slow the progress of the fire until their force was augmented by the lumbermen from the far side of the Chicapoo River. They didn't doubt, even for a minute, that this help would be forthcoming. It was the code of the timber country. Fire-fighting came above all else. No matter where men were or what they were doing, the top priority went to the men who needed help to fight fire in their timber.

Redwood Jackson's arms and shoulders ached from his valiant efforts. Each swing of his axe brought new pains shooting from his wrists to his shoulders and down his sides. His throat was parched. His lungs ached from inhaled smoke and his eyes smarted frightfully. Then he was aware of Woo Fang at his side. "Water?" the Oriental queried.

Redwood rested his broadaxe on the ground and took the dipper that the Chinese cook held toward him. He filled it from a pail and dashed cool water against his tortured face. He drank deeply of the second dipperful. Then, once again, he grabbed his axe.

Before he could swing, Cal Peabody rushed toward him. "They's another!" the old man shouted.

"What's that?"



Jackson Frantically Swung His Axe at the Tree

"Another fire! It's burnin' on the far side of the house."

Jackson grabbed a handful of Cal's shirt. "Gimme the facts," he demanded. "Gimme the true facts and make 'em fast an' straight. What'd you say about another fire?"

"Like this one," Cal gasped. "The timber is burnin'. I seen it from the house. They's flames shootin' higher than the highest o' the trees! Yuh gotta get this one under control an' git over tuh fight the new fire!"

"Where're the men from the syndicate camp?" demanded the bearded guard called Blackie. "Why ain't they come tuh help us?"

"They'll be here," promised Jackson. "They ain't all of them rats like Zachery an' Danahy! We'll have help as soon as they c'n get here. We gotta fight until they come."

If Jackson had only known the help he counted on was blocked by the angry Chicapoo! Help was near at hand. Help was, in fact, less than a mile away. But it might just as well have been a hundred miles away. The Chicapoo Bridge was blown to smithereens and the men from the syndicate camp were cut off.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WHITE WATER CROSSING

More than a score of men stood where the bridge had been, and more were arriving on the run with every passing moment. They stood and stared at disaster. Great columns of smoke rose from three different parts of the redwood forest on the south side of the Chicapoo River. Great flames leaped up from time to time to tint those columns of smoke with pink and red.

The men from the syndicate camp included all classes of lumber-camp society. There were the lowly swampers, the four- and two-up drivers, flat-heads, scalers, skidway men, and sawers as well as the few professional fire fighters who were always kept on duty. The men had saws and axes, swabs and pails—everything, in fact, with which to fight a fire. And there they stood, unable to do anything but watch.

The crowd had increased to more than half a hundred. Some of those men, as tough and hard-bitten as they were, had frank tears in their eyes as they stood watching fine timber eaten up by flames while they were powerless to fight. It was not a silent crowd. Everyone seemed to be shouting.

Some shouted curses at the river that blocked them. Others cried out imprecations at the fire, at the bridge that had disappeared, at their fellow men, and at everything in general. There were a dozen suggestions for crossing the river. Two men waded in with ropes about their waists. After dropping into water that was over their heads, they cried in panic to be hauled back to shore. Someone suggested trying to go around the river. Someone else shouted the information that it would be a fifty-mile trip.

Then a clatter of hoofbeats caught everyone's attention. They turned to see a big horse brought to a skidding halt. Gene Autry leaped to the ground with a coil of rope clutched in one hand. "Make way," he cried.

The men fell back as Gene rushed toward the stump that had anchored the bridge. He dropped a noose, then twirled it overhead as he ran. Ten feet from the stump his arm shot forward. The noose went up and out, with a trail of rope behind it. It settled over the stump and Gene pulled the rope taut. Turning, he shouted, "Come here, Champ!"

Obediently the big horse trotted forward.

A hundred questions rose from the crowd. "What's he goin' to do?" "Who is he?" "Where did he come from?"

Gene's voice rang out to top all others. "Listen to me," he shouted. "I'm going to try to take a line

across that water."

Someone shouted, "It can't be done."

Someone else cried, "You'll drown. We tried it."

Again Gene Autry shouted for attention. "If I can get across," he yelled, "I'll tie my rope to the other side. Then you can all grab the rope and pull yourselves across the river."

Had there been time for the placing of bets, the odds would have been a thousand to one against Gene's success. But the men who would have given these odds didn't know two things. They didn't know the man was Gene Autry and they didn't know the big horse was Champ.

Gene was in the saddle with the end of the rope tied to the pommel. "Come on, Champ," he cried. "It's up to you, big fellow."

Champ plunged into the churning water and sank below the surface. His head came up. Gene, straddling the courageous beast, shouted words of encouragement, while the horse fought the rapids.

Horse and rider were at first swept a few yards downstream. Then Gene pulled Champ's head around to face obliquely upstream. Champ's powerful legs pumped in the deep water. He could just about hold his position in the current. Most of the energy went into fighting against the current itself to avoid being swept downstream. But the space between the horse and the shore became wider and

wider.

The men on the bank were silent. They watched, frozen to speechlessness by the valiant battle of the horse against the fury of the Chicapoo. The fires in the forest were, for the moment, forgotten.

Now Champ was in midstream where the current was strongest. He went beneath the surface, taking Gene Autry under with him. When the heads of the man and the horse reappeared, they were several feet downstream. Gene leaned forward, his lips inches from Champ's ears. "We'll make it, Champ," he said. "Come on, Champ, we'll show 'em how to fight white water."

Inch by inch, so slowly that it wasn't at first apparent, the horse regained the lost ground. Inch by inch the horse and Gene Autry approached the shore on Jackson's side.

Presently the watchers realized that the horse and his brave master were winning their fight. Now it was but a question of the horse's strength. Champ was expending his strength extravagantly. Flecks of white that were not water appeared at the sides of the horse's mouth. His head bobbed as his legs churned under water.

Gene gathered up the slack in his rope. He formed a big loop and held it ready. The shore was just a few feet away. He tossed the loop over the bridge's anchorage. Then he pulled to help Champ

In his fight. And then a mighty cheer rose from the crowd that had grown to nearly a hundred men. Gene leaped ashore with Champ's bridle in his hand. The gallant horse scrambled to firm ground. The Chicapoo was crossed.

Gene lost no time. He pulled the rope tight. Even as he did so, the first of the men from the syndicate camp plunged into the water. With tools tied to their belts, they pulled themselves, hand over hand, along the rope.

In the meantime, another fire had broken out in Jackson's redwoods.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PARTIAL VICTORY

Redwood Jackson's senses were numb. He didn't feel the pain of the burns on his face and hands. He didn't know that his hair and eyebrows were singed—that his eyelashes were gone. He fought on, swinging his axe, like a prize fighter who, though knocked unconscious, still stands swinging his fists. The men with Redwood Jackson were in the same condition. They kept going far beyond the limits of human endurance. They didn't realize that the fire was closing in on them, that they would soon be trapped with no way to escape.

Great trees were falling on all sides, sending up great showers of sparks. Enormous clouds of varicolored smoke swirled around the men, choking and strangling them.

Woo Fang and Cal Peabody worked as hard as everyone else. They rushed from one man to another, dousing each with water. Then raced to the near-by pool to refill their pails. The men were soaked with water. It was this alone that kept their clothes from bursting into flame from the countless falling sparks and flaming brands.

"Fight," gasped Jackson with a choking sob.

"G-Got tuh keep fightin'!"

He swung his axe, but it was a feeble blow.

"We won't quit," he cried huskily. "W-We g-gotta keep fightin'—" He swung his axe again—swung it with all of his remaining strength, then sobbed as he saw how futile his blow was. He felt the axe slip from his hands. He felt himself stagger and leaned against the broad bosom of a great tree for support. His knees were buckling. He tried to stiffen them, but his muscles refused to obey the orders of a fighting heart.

Redwood Jackson opened his eyes painfully and saw a white glare. He lay for several moments, staring at nothing but the white, as he tried to gather his badly scattered senses. Then he turned his head and saw the face of Gene Autry wearing a grin.

"Ain't even dirty," he muttered. "Git in there an' fight the fire."

"Take it easy, Jackson. Don't try to grab everything at once. Get one fact at a time."

Realization of his position came slowly. It finally dawned on Jackson that he lay in bed, that the white glare that had baffled him was nothing more than the ceiling of his own large bedroom. He raised his hand and found it wrapped in bandages.

"You're just one great big mass of burns," Gene said. "But none of them is very serious. The saw-

bones from the lumber camp came here and wrapped you up like a mummy."

"Lumber," muttered the old man. "Lumberin' camp rats. They burned my timber. They burned my redwood trees."

"When you're ready to listen, I'll give you a few facts," Gene said softly. "The fire you're talking about was two days ago."

"Two days!"

Gene nodded.

"I—I been here in bed—for two days?"

"That's right."

"That's a lie. I never been sick a day in my life."

Gene laughed at the surly tone in Redwood's voice. He considered it a good sign. "You're not sick now," he said. "In fact, we had a hard time getting you in bed. You weren't even conscious, but you kept fighting the men that were trying to keep you down. The doc finally gave you a couple of shots in the arm to make you rest."

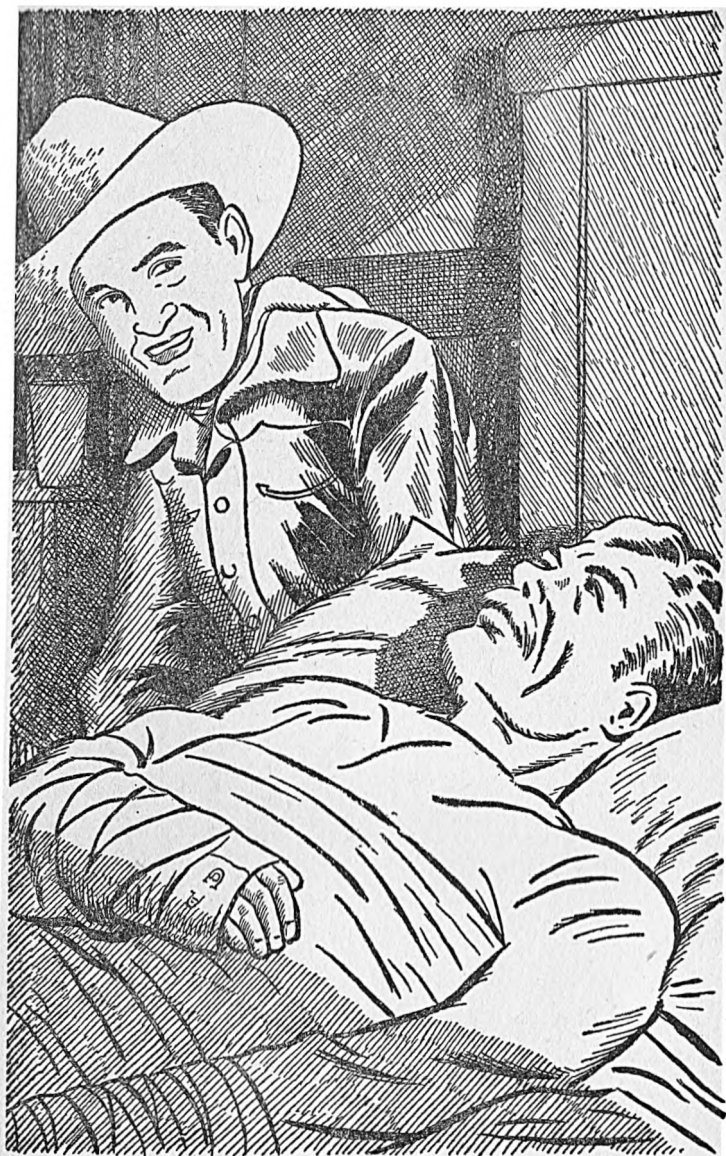
"What doc?"

"From the syndicate camp."

"I don't want none of his medicine. They're all rats in that camp. Pack of rats that fired my timber, then didn't come to help fight the fire."

"You've got a lot of news to catch up on."

Jackson muttered again. "Don't want that saw-bones or his medicine."



"You're Just One Mass of Burns."

"You've already got all the medicine he's going to give you."

"How bad hurt am I?"

"You'll be up and around in a couple of days."

Redwood sighed deeply and turned slightly. "Tain't no use," he said. "Tain't no use gettin' well. Fire burned everything. Fire burned all the trees. More'n one fire, too. Lots of fires."

He saw Cal Peabody and Woo Fang grinning at him. "Hyenas," he grumbled. "Grinnin' fools. What's there to grin about?" Then the look of dazed confusion seemed to lift from his eyes like a curtain. He looked directly at Gene Autry and said, "What happened? Give me the worst."

"You're not badly hurt."

"Never mind me! How about the trees? Is there any of them left?"

"Lots of them. In fact, the fires didn't take over one per cent of your timber."

"How d'ya know?"

"The cruisers from the syndicate camp told me. And they know what they're talking about. You see, Redwood, the whole thing was a scheme that Steve Danahy and Vince Zachery cooked up. First they blew up the bridge so's help couldn't cross the Chicapoo. Then they sent men to set fires in your timber."

"I know that part of it. I found where they'd set

one. There was gasoline slopped all over the ground an' a fuse leadin' to it. While I took care of that, the fires started breakin' out all over."

Gene then explained how a rope had helped the men cross the river, how they had arrived just as Redwood slumped to the ground. "I wish you could have seen those men go to work," he said. "It was something I'll never forget. They waded into that timber with their saws and axes going. You never saw such work. The chips flew like hailstones and the trees dropped faster'n anything I ever saw. In almost no time the first fire was under control. Ten men stayed to fight it while the rest moved on to the next fire. Before sunset they had all the fires controlled and it was just a case of keeping watch until they burned themselves out."

"Y-you mean to say that I didn't lose all my trees?"

"Just a few that you'll never miss," replied Gene.

"If I could only get the rats that started 'em."

"You needn't worry about that," replied Gene soberly.

"No?"

Gene shook his head. "Their ignorance of forest fires betrayed them. We found both of those men, or at least—their remains."

"Remains?"

"They must have slopped a lot of gasoline on

their clothes. They were trapped in the forest. They didn't have a chance."

"Yuh mean, they're dead?"

Gene Autry nodded.

"What else happened?"

"We threw a temporary bridge across the Chicapoo so the doctor could come and take care of you and your men. Wait till you get up and look around this house. You won't know your own home. It's a combination hospital and jail-house."

"Who is hurt?"

"All your guards were burned, but none of them any worse than you."

"What'd you mean by jail-house?"

"We have a few prisoners. When I told the men from the syndicate camp how Zachery and Disbro destroyed the bridge and gave 'em a few other details, they were on your side. They made a new bridge, as I said, and went with me to make a few arrests."

"You mean we got Zachery here as a prisoner?"

"That's right. And Disbro. He's the one that helped Zach blow the bridge."

"Who else?"

"Steve Danahy."

"Great day! You got him, too?"

"We've got him, with evidence enough to put him on ice for about twenty years. We not only got the

leaders of that syndicate camp, but also a little black notebook that lists the other men like yourself that they were planning to go after."

"Then the whole syndicate is smashed?"

Gene shook his head slowly. "Unfortunately," he said, "that's not the case. We smashed the leaders of this camp. But that's all. There are a lot of other camps that the syndicate controls."

"Aw-w, thunder'n' blazes. Then the crooked work in the redwood region'll go right on. Is that it?"

"It will, until we get the ringleaders of the syndicate."

"Any way of gettin' them?"

"I have a few ideas about that."

"How?"

"As soon as you're up and around, Jackson, I'm going to take the prisoners to the jail in Timber City. I know the sheriff down there. He'll give me all the help he can. Between us we might be able to make Danahy or Zachery squeal."

"Make 'em tell who the leaders of the syndicate are, eh?"

"Yes."

"An' give evidence that'll put them ringleaders behind the bars."

"That's right."

"When yuh goin' tuh do this, Gene?"

"As soon as you're able to take care of yourself."

It was Woo Fang who spoke next. He had left the room silently a few moments earlier. He returned with his usually placid countenance twisted in emotion. He began jabbering in Chinese.

"Hold it, yuh crazy Chineese," barked Redwood Jackson. "Maybe you're talkin', but as far as I'm concerned you ain't sayin' a thing. Start over an' talk my language."

Two tall, handsome men brushed past the grinning cook. One of them said, "He's tryin' to introduce a couple of strangers." Jackson turned toward the speaker. He stared for a second, then emitted a bellow that could have been heard as far as the Chicapoo River. "Jack," he roared. "My boy! An' Hank! Great day, you've come home!"

The two lads broke into great laughs as they fell on their knees beside the bed and tried to embrace the old man. Redwood pushed his sons aside and introduced Gene Autry. There was handshaking all around and a quick summary of recent events.

"An' Gene Autry licked 'em," declared old Redwood. "He licked that gol-darned syndicate outfit to a frazzle an' now that you boys are home, he ain't goin' to lose no time in runnin' the polecats to the calaboose!" He turned to Gene. "Ain't that so?" he demanded.

"The syndicate isn't licked yet. Not by a long shot. But at least we've made a start!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MURDER IN JAIL

With two inmates the Timber City jail was filled to capacity. Timber City was a community that had grown around a railroad station and a telegraph office. It was small and unimportant, but it served as a focal point for communications and mail in the heart of the redwood mountains.

Timber City had a few stores and saloons, two churches, and a bank. There was also an establishment that combined the activities of a garage and blacksmith shop. There was a coroner, a doctor, a justice of the peace (who was also an insurance agent and notary public), a lawyer whose name was Smythe, and Sheriff Lawson. The sheriff's domain was in the left-hand side of the two-story building that housed the bank and, on the second floor, the offices of the justice of the peace, the coroner, and J. Middleton Smythe.

The jail consisted of a small room adjoining the office of the sheriff. It was an eight-by-ten room that held two cots, two chairs, and a battered washstand. It was usually used to hold men whose drinking had made them overly boisterous or quarrelsome. Sheriff Lawson treated these individuals with

kindness and consideration. Many a lumberman from the surrounding hills and a number of the townsmen had awakened in Lawson's little jail. Lawson was always on hand with plenty of black coffee, followed by a substantial breakfast. He provided facilities for washing and tools for shaving, then turned his "overnight guest" loose to go home or to his work.

With two prisoners, both of them genuine criminals, the sheriff found himself in an important position. He sat in his office, a heavy gun strapped to his hips, and watched the clock. It was five minutes to nine. An important meeting was scheduled for nine o'clock.

"Yes, sir," Lawson said to a deputy who shared his responsibilities, "Gene Autry said he'd be in at nine this morning an' between us we'll decide what to do about the prisoners."

"I saw 'em when they was brought in last night," Kenny Haslip said. "The round-bellied one sure looks like a slick critter. Looked like ready money. What're their names?"

"Danahy an' Zachery. The slick-lookin' one is Steve Danahy."

"T'other looks like somethin' yuh hang on a post tuh keep crows out'n a cornfield," observed the deputy. "What'd they do?"

"I don't rightly know," replied the sheriff. "They

got mixed up in some crooked work in the timber. They're slated to take a long stretch in the calaboose."

"What charges you holdin' 'em on?"

"Charges?"

"You can't hold men in the calaboose without charges—you know that, Sheriff."

"Gene Autry said tuh hold 'em an' I held 'em. He'll file the charges against 'em when the time comes." The sheriff lowered his voice to a confidential tone. "I'll tell yuh this, Kenny," he said. "There's some mighty crooked operations goin' on in the redwood timber. Some outfit that's just hog-wild with power an' influence has been ridin' roughshod over the small operators. Gene Autry aims tuh do some-thin' about it. Them two in the cell are his first prisoners. He aims to question 'em about the men that gave 'em their orders."

The door opened and Sheriff Lawson bounced to his feet. "Gene Autry!" he exclaimed.

"Hi, Sheriff," he greeted. "How's everything?"

"First rate, Gene. Shake hands with my top deputy, Kenny Haslip."

"Glad to know you," said Gene with a smile as he gripped the hand of the pop-eyed deputy.

"I—uh—I'm downright honored," stammered Kenny. "I sure have heard aplenty about you, Mr. Autry. It's a mighty big honor tuh meet up with

you."

"Nonsense," laughed Gene. "I'll bet Sheriff Lawson's been telling you a lot of fancy stories about me."

"I've sure heard aplenty."

"Most of them are stretched pretty far."

"Don't you believe it," broke in the sheriff. "This here man," pointing to Gene, "has jugged more crooks than any ten other men put together."

Gene felt a little embarrassed. To change the subject he said, "How are your prisoners?"

"Meek as lambs an' quiet as kittens on a thick felt pad," replied the sheriff. "There ain't been a peep out of them since I shoved their breakfast through the door."

"Good."

"I had a phone call early this morning," the sheriff went on. "It came from Redwood Jackson."

"Oh! What's he got to say?"

"He just wanted tuh know if the critters in the jail had squealed on the men that gave 'em their orders. I told him that you an' I had questioned 'em a little last night an' that we didn't get far. Told him we aimed to continue the questionin' first thing this mornin'."

Gene nodded.

"Redwood said he didn't think Danahy an' his scarecrow partner would have anything to say."

"We'll soon know," replied Gene.

"I'm pretty good at persuadin' unwillin' men tuh talk," put in Kenny Haslip. "If you left me alone with those tin horns for about half an hour, I'd loosen their tongues."

Gene smiled. "I guess I know what you mean, Kenny, but we can't use third-degree methods."

"Just what is it you want to know?"

"I want to know the names of the head men in the lumber syndicate."

"The head men?"

"Yes."

"The two in the cell ran that big camp up near the Chicapoo, didn't they?"

"There are a number of camps like that one. They're all part of a giant outfit that's trying to get a monopoly in the redwood industry."

"I savvy."

"The government can step in and act if we can show that all the camps are under the same head. But unless we can get something to prove that a monopoly exists, we can't do much."

"I bet," muttered Kenny, "I c'd make 'em squeal."

"Let's bring them out and start asking questions," suggested Gene.

"Just a minute, Gene," said Sheriff Lawson. "Before we do that, I got something to tell you."

Gene looked at the lawman questioningly.

"You gotta keep your back against a wall."

"What do you mean?"

"You're in danger, Gene. That's what I mean. You're in a lot of danger."

"Who said so?"

"Redwood Jackson. After you left his place, he got to talkin' to a few of the men that're still workin' in the camp on the Chicapoo. He talked to the super an' a couple of others."

"The rest of the men up there are on the level," Gene said.

"One of them wasn't on the level. There was a critter named Disbro that you left in Redwood's house."

"He was pretty badly hurt. I thought it would be better to leave him with Jackson for a few days."

"He's a darn sight worse off right now."

"Yes?"

"He's dead!"

"Dead!" echoed Gene in surprise. "He wasn't hurt *that* badly."

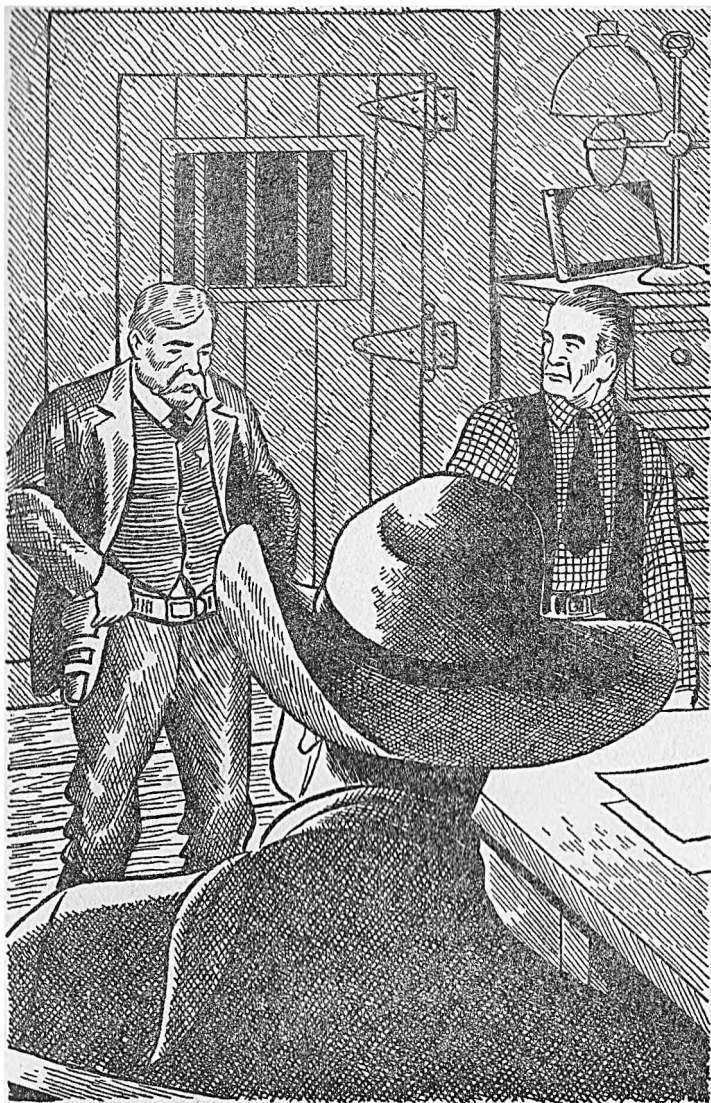
"It wasn't the hurts that killed him. It was poison."

"Great day!" exclaimed Kenny, the deputy. "You didn't tell me that, Sheriff Lawson."

"Warn't no reason to tell you."

"Have you any details?"

"Not many. He died of tobacco that was poisoned."



"You're in Danger, Gene."

Seems that he had a package of chewin' tobacco. Late last night that Chinaman that cooks for Jackson went to see if Disbro was settled for the night an' found him dead. Well, he called Jackson an' his two boys an' they looked things over. Couldn't find no reason for Disbro to be dead so sudden. They cleaned out the room an' tossed a lot o' stuff out back of the house, includin' a half-used pack of chewin' tobacco. Jackson has a goat at his place—maybe you know that."

"Yes. Woo Fang likes goat milk."

"Well, goats have a likin' for tobacco. This nanny found the pack that Jackson had tossed out an' started chewin' it. Two minutes later she dropped over dead. That eatin' tobacco was poisoned!"

"Gene's face wore a grim expression. "It looks to me," he said slowly, "as if we've got a murder charge against Steve Danahy."

"Yeah?"

"Danahy left that tobacco for Disbro."

Sheriff Lawson slapped his thigh. "Now what d'ya know about that!" he exclaimed. "If we c'n just prove that, we'll sure as thunder have some-thin'!" He lowered his voice again. "What I started out to say," he went on, "is this. You c'n see that the gang you're fightin' will go to any lengths. They'll do murder if need be. That's why you gotta keep your back against a wall an' your guard up."

"That," said Gene calmly, "is why we've got to keep a close watch on the men inside your jail. We'd better question them while they're still available."

"I'll get 'em right out," replied the sheriff. He drew a heavy key from his hip pocket and unlocked the iron door to the adjoining room.

"Come here, you two," he called. "We want to have a powwow with you." There was no reply from within. Lawson squinted into the room. Then he entered. An instant later he shouted, "Gene! Come in here! Quick!"

Gene hurried to the lawman's side.

"Look!" cried Lawson, pointing to Danahy and Zachery sprawled on the floor.

Gene dropped to one knee and felt of Danahy's wrist. Then he turned to Zachery and examined the lean-faced man. Slowly, silently he rose to his feet and faced the startled sheriff.

"Wha—what happened?" gasped Lawson.

"I don't know what happened," Gene replied quietly. "But those two men aren't going to give us any information. They're dead!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BREAKFAST OF DEATH

"They can't be dead!" cried Sheriff Lawson. "Men don't just drop dead from nothin' at all! These men were alive and well a couple of hours ago. Are you sure they ain't playin' possum?"

"Not unless they've found a way to play possum and stop their hearts," replied Gene Autry. "There's no pulse at all."

"I can't believe it," the sheriff said.

Gene stepped to the wall of the cell and took a small mirror from its hook. He held this before the mouth and nostrils of Steve Danahy and watched it closely. There was no clouding of the bright surface. He made the same test with the body of Vince Zachery. The mirror remained undimmed. "That's conclusive proof," he said when he had finished. "These men are dead." He turned to the deputy sheriff and said, "You'd better go and get the coroner."

Kenny Haslip ran his fingers through a lock of hair that had fallen over his forehead and nodded silently. As he started for the door, Sheriff Lawson put a hand on his arm. "Just a minute," he said. "Before we let this news get out of this room, let's try

an' figure out how it happened. There just ain't no way that anyone could've got to kill these two! No way at all."

"How long ago did you see them alive?" asked Gene.

Lawson looked at his watch. "It's nine-fifteen right now. I seen 'em just exactly two hours an' fifteen minutes ago. That's when I opened the door an' shoved their breakfast in to 'em. You can see the tray right there on the end of that cot."

Gene glanced at a large metal tray upon which thick white dishes were stacked.

"You c'n see that they must've been all right then," the sheriff went on. "They ate every smidge of the grub I brought 'em, an' there was a sizeable amount of it. Ham an' eggs—three eggs apiece fried sunny side up—an' a heapin' bowl of cornmeal mush, a pot of coffee, an' a pitcher of cream. There was a stack of bread, too. Buttered bread. I've got a name for feedin' the prisoners good."

Gene had returned to Steve Danahy's lifeless form. He made a careful examination for marks of violence, but found none. "Were you," he asked the sheriff, "in the office all the time?"

"I ain't left the office since I brought in the food! I opened 'er up at seven when I brought that tray an' I ain't left here since. Kenny an' you are the only ones that've come through the door."

"The window ain't big," Kenny observed.

Gene glanced at the single window, a high, small square in which heavy iron bars were set.

"No one could get through that window," the sheriff said. "Not even if the bars weren't there. It ain't big enough for anything bigger'n a six-year-old."

Gene stood on a chair and examined the window. There was a pane of glass set in a wooden frame inside the bars. The frame swung inward on two hinges and there was a catch so it could be fastened from the inside. The window was closed. "No way to open this from the outside?" he asked.

Sheriff Lawson shook his head. "It was cold last night," he said. "I guess the two prisoners kept 'er shut."

Gene nodded and stepped down from the chair.

"Looks to me like Danahy got what he deserved," Kenny muttered. "From what Redwood Jackson told the sheriff on the phone, Danahy killed Disbro with that poisoned chewin' tobacco."

"Poison!" exclaimed Gene. "That's it! Why didn't we think of that in the first place?" He strode to the cot and started an inspection of the breakfast dishes. "Did you fix this food?" he asked the sheriff.

"No. I never fix the prisoners' eats. I get 'em from the restaurant across the road. Miz Basset keeps an

account o' what I get an' the county pays her for it. But she wouldn't put no poison in the food. She'd have no reason to do so."

"She wouldn't, but someone else might!"

"But who?"

"I don't know. That's something we've got to find out. These two were killed for the same reason that Disbro was killed."

"To shut 'em up so's they couldn't tell anything?"

"Of course."

"Now who in blazes could o' done it?"

"We'll ask who was in the restaurant this mornin'," Gene decided.

"That won't tell us nothin'."

"Why not?"

"Because dang near everyone in Timber City goes to the widder's place for breakfast. She opens up at about six o'clock in the mornin' an' from that time on her place is jam-packed with customers. I was there myself this mornin', an' so was this jug-head deputy of mine. The coroner was there an' so was the judge an' Lawyer Smythe an' about twenty-five others."

"They were all there when this tray of food was prepared?"

"I reckon so," the sheriff nodded.

"Then any one of them could have dropped poison on the food or in the coffee."

"Yep."

Gene stacked the dishes carefully and covered them with a sheet pulled from one of the cots. "We'll find someone who can examine this stuff and see what kind of poison was used."

Sheriff Lawson said, "I reckon Doc McAnders can do it all right. He's pretty slick at such things. He's done it before."

"Good," replied Gene.

"I'll tell yuh, Gene," the sheriff went on. "This proves one thing."

"What's that, Lawson?"

"It proves that this here syndicate has got someone workin' right here in Timber City."

"It also proves that the leaders were afraid of what the prisoners might have said."

The sheriff nodded soberly. "Another thing," he said. "It shows that you got to be mighty careful, Gene. You got to keep a wall to your back an' don't take no chances."

"I don't intend to take any unnecessary chances," Gene replied.

The door in the sheriff's office opened and closed. Gene spoke softly as footsteps sounded in the outer room. "Not a word about this just yet," he said.

Sheriff Lawson nodded and said, "You hear that, Kenny? That's an order!"

"I savvy," the deputy replied.

"Hey, Sheriff, where in thunderation are yuh?" It was a shrill voice from the other room.

"That's Joe Turner," the sheriff explained. Raising his voice, he said, "Be right with yuh, Joe." He stood aside to let Gene and the deputy pass from the cell, then he closed the door and turned the key in the lock.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SMYTHE

Joe Turner was red-faced and sweaty. His voice was shrill with excitement. He began talking as soon as Sheriff Lawson appeared, but in his violent eagerness the words spilled over one another in an unintelligible jumble.

"Hold on," cut in the sheriff. "Calm down, Joe."

Joe broke off the garbled recital.

"All I could make out of what you said," the sheriff complained, "was something about bein' robbed. Now take it easy an' start all over again."

Joe pointed to Gene Autry and said, "Who's he?"

"Gene Autry. I reckon you've heard of him."

Joe nodded. Lawson turned to Gene and said, "This is Joe Turner. He owns a piece of timberland not far from here."

"I *did* own it," Joe said. "But I'm bein' robbed! I'm bein' robbed every minute an' there ain't a thing I can do about it."

"Who," asked Gene Autry, "is robbing you?"

"It's that skinflint lawyer! That crooked, schemin', snivelin' lawyer named Smythe!"

"Speaking of me, Joe?" called a voice from the doorway.

The man who entered was slim and of medium height. He appeared to be somewhere between forty-five and fifty years old. Thin, mouse-colored hair was brushed straight back from his sloping forehead and deep lines grooved his face, running from the corners of his long, thin nose to the edges of his lipless mouth. Smythe didn't seem troubled by the adjectives Joe Turner had used to modify his name.

"You bet I'm speakin' of you," shouted Joe. "An' I might add that you're an oily-tongued weasel on top of everything else!"

Smythe looked at Sheriff Lawson and said, "I saw Joe come in here. I had an idea that he might have a misconception of the situation, so I thought it advisable to be on hand."

"I haven't made head or tail out o' his trouble," the sheriff said. "I don't know what he's ragin' about."

"Joe has a misunderstanding of certain laws, that's all," the lawyer said smoothly. "Perhaps we can straighten him out."

"Misunderstandin' my eyel" snapped Joe Turner. "Sheriff, you listen to me. You know where my land is, don't yuh?"

The sheriff nodded. He turned to Gene and explained, "Joe owns land on the hill that slopes down to Dipper Creek."

Gene nodded.

"What about that land, Joe?"

"I'll tell you the whole story, Sheriff! Smythe came to me an' said he had a customer who wanted to buy that piece of timberland from me. He told me what was offered an' it was a mighty fair price. It was more'n I expected to get for the land. I hadn't thought of sellin' up to then, but when I heard what I could get, I thought it over an' decided to sell."

"And that," put in Smythe, "is all there is to it."

"Like the devil it is! You keep your trap shut an' let me finish."

Smythe nodded calmly and said, "Go on."

"Here's the way Smythe drew up the deal on my land. He said that his client didn't have the cash to pay for it all at once. He paid me ten per cent down to bind the deal, an' there was a contract signed. He agreed to pay the balance in six months' time."

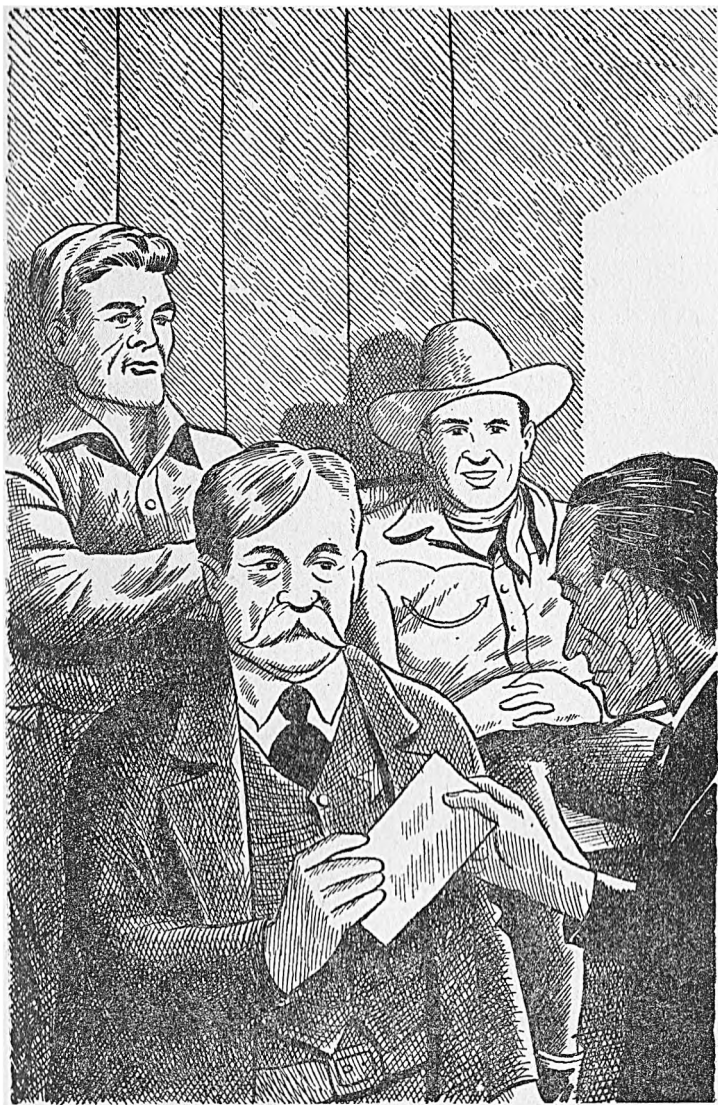
"I'll leave it to the sheriff to decide whether or not there is anything wrong with a deal like that," said the lawyer.

"It's common enough," Lawson commented.

Gene Autry made no comment.

From an inner pocket the lawyer drew a document bound in blue paper. "It just happens," he said, "that I have a copy of that agreement with me. You are welcome to examine it, Sheriff."

The lawman glanced at the paper and noted the date of the agreement. "The deal was made a month



The Lawyer Handed Over the Document

ago," he said. "What's happened that put you in such a stew all of a sudden, Joe?"

"I moved out of the shack on the side of the hill and went to visit my sister in San Francisco. I got back a couple of days ago an' went up to get a few things I'd left in the cabin. You should see what's happenin' on that hillside! There's a whole lumber camp up there! I never in all my life saw so much machinery an' so many men workin' at one place!"

"What did you expect to find?" demanded Smythe. "A cattle ranch? You knew that the land was bought for the timber! Why should you be so surprised to find that men are cutting the timber?"

"Sheriff," Joe went on, ignoring the lawyer, "they've built a flume right down the hill to the creek. They've already cleared off the trees at the bottom of the hill next to the creek an' they're workin' up."

"It says here," Lawson tapped the document in his hand, "that the buyer can take timber from that land as soon as the deal is closed and the earnest money paid over. You got your earnest money when you got that ten-per-cent down-payment."

"I thought that meant when I got the balance that was due me. That's the way I understood the deal." Joe swung toward Smythe. "That's the impression you gave me," he charged.

"You must have misunderstood me," Smythe said.

"If I did, it's because you intended I should!"

"What's your main trouble, Joe?" the sheriff asked.

"Wait'll you hear the rest. The boss on that job didn't know who I was when I went up that hill. I guess he thought I was lookin' for work. He asked me if I'd like to earn top wages plus a bonus. Then he went on to say that every cord of timber had to be taken off that land within the next five months. He said that there'd be a mighty handsome bonus for the men that worked there, if the job was done. Sheriff, don't you see the scheme? Those crooks are goin' to take all the timber an' then forfeit the land. They don't intend to pay me another dime! Not a cent! They'll let me have the hill back and it won't be worth a thing! Won't even be good for plantin' crops on account of all the stumps that'll be left!"

The sheriff looked at Smythe, who stood smirking in satisfaction. "The deal is legal, I suppose," he muttered.

"It'll stand in any court in the land. If that poor fool thinks he can get an injunction to stop the cutting of that timber, he's due for a shockingly rude awakening. When I buy land, I make sure the deal will hold water! Especially when I buy it for myself."

"For yourself?" echoed Joe Turner. "You mean to say that you're the one that owns that land?"

"As far as you're concerned, I am."

"You told me it was for someone else! You told me you were just the go-between."

"Really, Turner, I can't remember everything I say. If men could remember all verbal agreements and understandings accurately there would be no need for written agreements. All I know," Smythe finished, "is what it says in the agreement."

"Sheriff," pleaded Joe, "he can't swindle me like this, can he?"

Lawson looked at Gene Autry. "What d'you think, Gene?"

Gene shook his head slowly. "I'm afraid Joe's the victim. I don't think there is anything he can do—legally." The last word was spoken in a lower voice, as an afterthought. If there was a slight emphasis, no one in the sheriff's office caught it.

Joe Turner looked at the faces around him with a desperate expression. He began to speak, then changed his mind. He turned and strode from the room, slamming the door behind him.

Smythe looked at Sheriff Lawson and grinned crookedly. "That poor fool has a lot to learn about the law," he said. "By the way, Sheriff, I haven't met this man."

"Gene Autry, Lawyer Smythe," the sheriff said shortly.

Smythe extended a limp hand which Gene Autry

ignored. "Smythe," he said, "Joe Turner called you a few names. He was right about you."

Smythe drew himself up stiffly. "Indeed?" he said. "Well, if you're going to be in Timber City very long, Autry, you might learn that it is unwise to make an enemy of me. I can be quite dangerous—within the law."

"I want to show you something," Gene said. "Open the door to that cell, Sheriff."

Lawson nodded and did as Gene Autry asked.

"Smythe," Gene said, gripping the attorney's arm, "come here." He dragged the protesting man to the door of the cell and shoved him inside. "Look what's on the floor," he said. "A few hours ago, that was a healthy man named Steve Danahy! The other man's name was Vince Zachery! Both of those men took orders from the head of the redwood syndicate! Both are dead."

Smythe paled slightly. He seemed shaken for a brief instant. Then he recovered his poise and said, "What about it? Why are you showing me a couple of dead men?"

"Do you know why those men are dead?"

"How would I know?"

"Those men knew facts that the sheriff and I were after. They could have told quite a bit about the lumber syndicate. They were killed to seal their lips!"

"You haven't explained why you're showing me this spectacle."

"I want you to remember those dead men! Remember that they were alive and well when they ate their breakfast this morning. Remember them as an example of what happens to men who fail in the jobs that the syndicate assigns them. Have you seen enough?"

"I'm not interested in dead men."

"Then get out of here!" snapped Gene.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GENE LEAVES TOWN

The coroner and the doctor confirmed Gene Autry's suspicions. A few simple tests by the former established the fact that Danahy and Zachery had died from arsenic. Substantial amounts of the deadly poison were found in the coffee that remained in the pot that had been used for the dead men's breakfast. It remained a mystery, however, who had found the opportunity to slip the arsenic into the coffee.

Gene Autry helped the sheriff question various suspected individuals and follow down what few clues there were, but the investigation got nowhere. The identity of the murderer remained unknown.

During the several days of the investigation of the double poisoning, Joe Turner established himself in a bare room above the Timber City saloon. He spent most of his time there or alone at a table in a dark corner of the main room. He talked to no one except to order a cup of coffee occasionally. His beard grew to a bristling stubble and his eyes became red-rimmed and bloodshot from want of sleep. He was silent and brooding, melancholy and morose. When spoken to, he replied with mono-

syllables or mere motions of his head. Once in a while, when someone sat with him, he voiced a most uncomplimentary opinion of Lawyer Smythe. He also made biting comments on the sheriff's helplessness and complained bitterly about the laws that made it possible for men to be robbed of their property.

Gradually the flurry of excitement stirred up by the murders in the jail died down and life in Timber City resumed its placid routine. On the morning of the fourth day, following the deaths by poisoning, Gene Autry appeared at Sheriff Lawson's office with Champ saddled and bridled and well rested. His camping gear was neatly rolled in blankets and packed into saddlebags. The sheriff looked at Gene in surprise. "Travelin'?" he asked.

Gene nodded. "I guess there's nothing further I can do around here. Don't seem to be getting anywhere on the poisonings."

Sheriff Lawson frowned. "It riles me tuh think that some buzzard here in town is gettin' away with murder," he grumbled. "Riles me no end, but I don't know what I can do about it. I've run down every lead an' questioned every suspect an' I'm right where I started."

Gene stuck out his hand. "I'll be back, Lawson," he promised.

"You'll be back?"

"Yes. I want to do a little scratching around on this lumber syndicate. Maybe I can pick up a few threads that'll give you something to work on."

"If I could just get my teeth in a good lead," the sheriff said. "If there was someone with a motive for murderin' those two—"

"The motive's not hard to find. Those two were killed so they couldn't name the big men in these crooked lumber deals."

"But there's none of those big men here in town."

Gene shook his head. "Someone here in town," he said, "is taking orders from those men. I have a few ideas, but there's no use making charges until I've got more than a hunch to back 'em up."

"You think Lawyer Smythe's involved?"

Gene looked at the sheriff and said, "Don't you?"

"I do."

"I think Smythe took over Joe Turner's timberland for the syndicate," Gene went on. "Though he bought it in his own name, I think he's simply a figurehead. If we could get the truth, we'd find that syndicate money is back of him."

"Exactly what I think," replied Lawson. He paused, then said, "I sure wish you could stick around for a while, Gene." He looked at the special deputy almost wistfully.

Gene smiled and shook his head. "Thanks, Sheriff. But I don't think I can be any help here."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm not sure. I might go back to the Chicapoo and talk to some of the men in the camp there. I might talk to Redwood Jackson to see if he has any theories."

"You say you *might*. That don't mean you're goin' to do it."

"Nope. It doesn't mean I'm going to."

The lawman studied Gene with a gleam of suspicion in his eyes. "Holdin' back on me?" he asked.

"If I learn anything important, Sheriff, you'll be one of the first to know about it."

"That a promise?"

"That," said Gene, "is a promise. You may count on it."

A few minutes later Champ moved slowly out of town with Gene Autry in the saddle.

Smythe watched the special deputy from the window of his office. When Gene was out of sight, he muttered, "I hope that's the last of Gene Autry."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE NEWCOMER

J. Middleton Smythe was in an ugly frame of mind as he approached the lumber camp on the hill that had once been Joe Turner's land. The lawyer disliked horseback riding under the best of conditions, and conditions during his present trip were certainly not the best. A cold wind chilled the man who was unused to the outdoors. Scudding clouds gave promise of rain that might begin falling at any moment. The ground was broken and uneven and much of the route led through underbrush that clawed at Smythe's legs. Smythe was not a horseman, but on that day he had no choice. He couldn't go from Timber City to the camp in his car. There were no roads. He couldn't even travel in a horse-drawn carriage. It was too far to walk, so he simply had to ride. And he didn't like it.

He made the trip a few days after Gene Autry had left town. Smythe had spent those days watching the futile efforts of Sheriff Lawson and his deputy as they tried to find some clue to the poison murders, and the equally futile efforts of Joe Turner in his dark corner trying to forget the loss of his timberland.

Then a message had arrived. Brady, the man in charge of the lumber camp, felt the need of consultation and advice. On a rented horse Smythe spent four hours on a trip that a fair horseman could have made in half the time.

He rode along the bank of Dipper Creek, noting with satisfaction that a great deal of land at the bottom of the hill had been already cleared of timber. A mass of logs floated in the creek. From time to time other logs shot down the flume.

Smythe turned his horse uphill. He rode past countless stumps that marked the places where great trees had once stood. He noted with satisfaction that the trees that had been taken, though large, were not nearly as large as the ones that remained on the upper two-thirds of the slope. His vile mood was somewhat dispelled by the sounds that reached his ears. Those sounds told how great were the efforts of the men who were at work in the woods. The rasp of sharp saws and the chug of axes mingled with the throaty coughing of the donkey engine. There was the clump of mules and the shouts of men who drove the mules. Twice on the uphill ride Smythe heard the thrilling cry of "Timber-r-r" followed by the crash of a falling tree. Three times he heard the unearthly sound of big logs shooting down the flume and splashing into Dipper Creek. Then he reached the camp.

Brady came out of the office to meet Smythe. The lawyer dismounted stiffly and shook hands with the big, broad-shouldered lumberman. "It looks to me," Smythe said, "as if you're doing fairly well."

"We're doing all right," replied Brady. "I could use a few more men, but I'll get by with what I have."

Smythe jabbed his thumb in the direction of the big trees. "Can you take most of those in the next five months?" he asked.

"We'll take all of them."

"Are you sure?"

Brady nodded. "We'll get 'em unless something breaks our stride. Right now we're going along at a good clip."

"Why did you send for me?"

"Because I've been worried about a few things that I heard."

"What'd you hear?" snapped the lawyer.

"There's a big lumber camp on the Chicapoo River, ain't there?"

"Yes."

"Ain't that controlled by the same outfit that's behind this one?"

"As far as you're concerned, Brady, I'm the one that owns this land."

"That's a good enough story for the public," Brady said, "but you and I both know that you're

nothing but a figurehead. The big boss of the syndicate gives orders to the men in charge of the Chicapoo camp the same as he gives orders to you. Ain't that so?"

Smythe pursed his lips and stroked his chin thoughtfully. After a pause, he said, "What of it?"

"Gene Autry went up to that Chicapoo camp, didn't he?"

Smythe nodded slowly. "Let's go inside the office," he said. "I'm cold."

Brady opened the door and led the way into the office, where two men were bent over desks. "You pencil pushers get out," he said. "I need this office for a private conference."

The men looked up curiously. One of them complained about having to catch up in his work.

"You can catch up some other time. Go on over to the bunkhouse and I'll send word when I'm through with my conference."

One of the men rose, as if glad to leave his work, and left the office without a word. The other said, "All right." He fumbled with his papers for several minutes while Brady and the lawyer sat quietly without speaking. When it became clear to the clerk that he wasn't going to overhear anything, he too left the room.

"Now," said Smythe when he and Brady were alone, "you tell me why you sent for me."

"I was asking about Gene Autry."

"What about him?"

"He went to the Chicapoo camp. A couple of days later things begin to happen. Two men die in a forest fire. A guy named Disbro dies of poisoned tobacco."

"You seem to be well informed," observed the lawyer shortly.

"Is my information correct?"

"As far as I know, it is."

Brady nodded. "Then Gene Autry brought a couple of men into Timber City. They were the men in charge of that camp. He stuck 'em in jail."

"Danahy and Zachery," submitted Smythe.

"Yeah. Then what happened? They died of poison."

"Well, what of it?"

"Just this. I don't like the way things happen to men who work for the syndicate when Gene Autry is around."

"You don't suppose he poisoned those three men, do you?"

Brady shook his head slowly. "I know better'n that."

"Well?"

"Is Gene Autry interested in this camp?" the lumberman asked.

"How in blazes do I know what interests Gene

Autry?" snapped the lawyer. "I barely know him."

"Is he trying to get something on the syndicate?"

"If he is, it's no concern of yours."

"I'm in charge of this camp."

"And you're taking orders from me. All you have to worry about is this timber. You see that it's cut and delivered in the next five months. That's all you have to do."

"That," observed Brady, "is all that Danahy and Zachery had to do. Look what happened to them."

"They knew things. They could have made a lot of trouble by telling what they knew. That's why they were killed."

"And Disbro?"

"Same reason. If you're as smart as I think you are, Brady, you'll be content without any further information."

"Maybe you're right."

"Of course I'm right."

"I'd feel a lot better about things if Gene Autry wasn't around this part of the country."

"Gene Autry is overrated," the lawyer said flatly.

"I doubt that."

"I know it for a fact. I saw him fumbling around in Timber City, trying to learn something about the poisoning of those two men. He didn't get anywhere at all."

"He's left town, hasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Where'd he go?"

"Confound it, Brady, I don't know anything about Autry. And I care less!"

"All right. Don't get sore about it."

"You didn't bring me all the way here to talk about Gene Autry, did you?" queried the lawyer with an angry frown.

"No. I've got to go over some of the records with you. That was the main reason I sent for you."

"Very well. Let's go over the records."

"First of all, I'd better have one of the men take care of your horse."

Smythe nodded. "I think I'll spend the night here. It may rain and I don't care to get wet."

"Well—if you want to. But I don't know where you'll sleep." Brady didn't seem pleased with the idea. "You wouldn't want to sleep in the bunk-house."

"Hardly!"

"There's already four of the bosses in my cabin. I suppose I could send a couple of those men down to Joe Turner's place. We ain't been usin' that because it's at the bottom of the hill. It's quite a hike."

Smythe gazed through the window at a small shack of logs that stood on the bank of Dipper Creek about a hundred yards from where the flume spilled into the water. "Someone's using the place," he said.

Brady said, "Nope. It's been vacant ever since Joe Turner left."

"If it's vacant, why is there smoke coming from the cabin chimney?"

"Fire?" Brady went to the window and looked down the hill. Smoke was coming from the chimney of Turner's former home. "That's funny," he muttered. "The place was vacant this morning. I know because I was in it. I was just looking it over."

"I wonder if Joe Turner has come back here?"

Brady said, "I don't know. Might be a good idea to find out."

"He's been hanging around Timber City for the last few days," explained the lawyer. "He made quite a hullabaloo about things."

"He did?"

"One of your foremen happened to see him and offered him a job, not knowing who he was. He told Joe that this lumber had to be taken before the end of the next five months. Joe got wise. He realized that we intended to clear the land, then forfeit on the land contract and not pay him the balance that's owed."

"He must've been fit to be tied."

"He was."

"What's he doing in Timber City?"

"Sobbing out his tale of woe to anyone who will listen."

J. Middleton Smythe rose to his feet. "If he's come back here," he said, "he may be planning sabotage. We'd better see if it's Joe Turner who is in that shack."

"Yeah, I think so too," Brady agreed.

Smythe grumbled about his muscles, made lame by the four-hour horseback ride, all the way downhill to Joe Turner's cabin. When he and Brady neared the place, they could see that the door was partly open. Then they saw the newcomer.

CHAPTER TWENTY

"CALL ME JAKE"

Judged by appearances, the newcomer might have been a desert rat, a prospector, a drifter, or just a plain hobo. His clothes were patched and dirty. The coat was too large and the trousers, held up by a length of rope in lieu of a belt, were too short. His hat was a shapeless black felt.

"Who are you?" demanded Jim Brady.

"What are you here for?" asked the lawyer. "This is private property. You're trespassing."

"I thought Joe Turner'd be around," replied the stranger in the doorway. "Has he moved?"

"Yes."

"I guess that accounts for it then," the stranger said with a grin that barely showed through his stubble of beard. "I wondered why the shack looked so deserted."

"This is a lumber camp," explained Brady. "Do you know anything about lumbering?"

"Not very much."

"D'you want a job?"

The stranger grinned again. "Not if I can avoid it," he said. Then added, "Right now I think I can avoid it."

J. Middleton Smythe said, "What's your name?"

"Why don't you just call me Jake?"

"Is that your name?"

"Nope. But it'll do as well as any other."

"Dodging the law, eh?" queried Brady. "Where are you wanted?"

"I didn't say I was dodging the law. I said Jake wasn't my real name. That's all. Do either of you gents know where I can find Joe Turner?"

"Why?"

"I've got to find him. That's all. It's important."

"How important?" demanded the lawyer.

"Mighty important. I'd be downright grateful if you could tell me where to find Joe Turner."

"You want information, but you're mighty unwilling to give any," Brady said. "You haven't told us anything about yourself or why you want to find Turner. Haven't even told us your name. Why should we help you?"

The man who called himself Jake shrugged his shoulders and said, "If it's a case of swap facts to locate Turner, I reckon I'll have to find him without your help." He pushed past Brady and Smythe and walked downstream without looking back.

The two men watched until the stranger was lost to view when his course led around a bend. Then Brady turned to Smythe and said, "Now what d'you make of him?"

The lawyer shook his head and frowned. "I don't know. I wonder if he thinks Turner still owns this land?"

"He didn't seem to be in need of money."

"No."

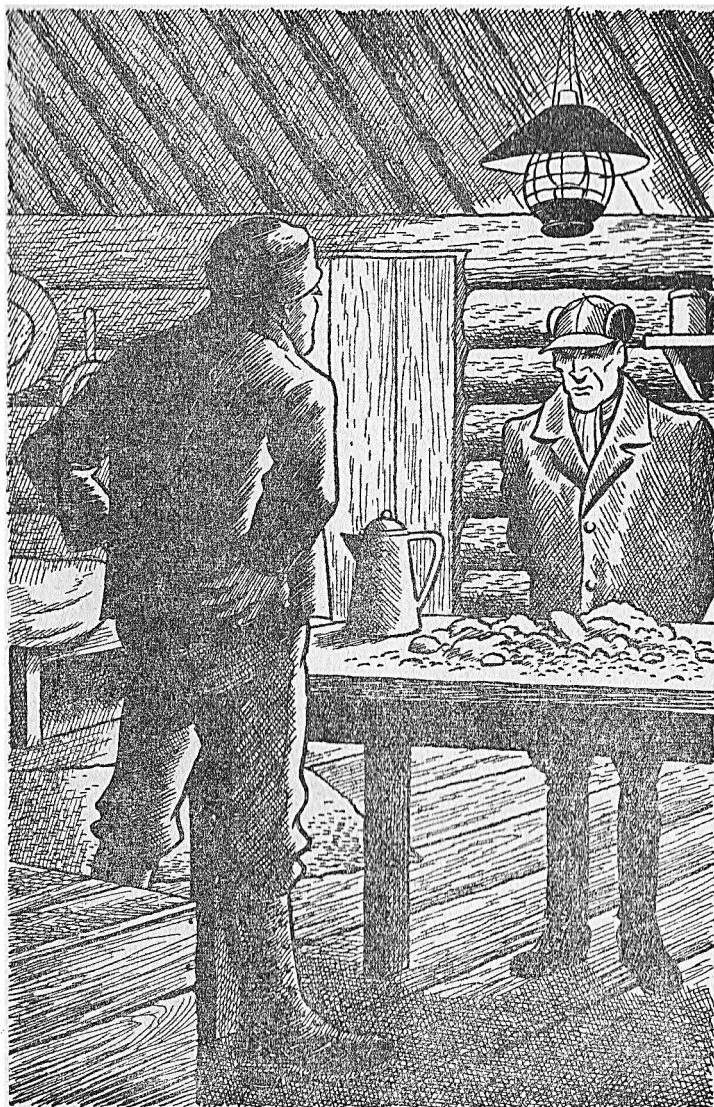
"Wasn't at all interested in a job."

Smythe said, "Let's look inside the shack. He built up a fire in the fireplace. He must have intended to stay here for some time."

Brady's quick eyes scanned the cabin. Though it still held the crude furniture, it was a barren-looking room. The bedding, the cooking utensils, and the small things that show that a place is lived in were gone. Brady took a couple of quick steps toward the table that stood in the center of the room. The table was littered with chunks of rock and dirt. "What's this?" he muttered.

A look of greed came into Smythe's face. "It may be ore!" he exclaimed. "Let me see it." He grabbed a few of the chunks and carried them to the doorway. His eyes lighted at the sight of thin traces of yellow that ran through the rock. "Brady! Look here! This is gold ore!" The lawyer's finger trembled as he pointed to the thin vein of yellow color.

Brady laughed as he took the rocks from Smythe and tossed them out on the ground. "Fool's Gold," he said. "You're not the first one to make that mistake. Many a prospector has lost his head, thinking



"This Is Gold Ore!"

he's struck it rich, only to find that he's got nothing but worthless pyrites."

"Are you sure that wasn't gold?"

Brady nodded. "I'm sure. As a matter of fact, real gold ore doesn't look like anything at all. I've heard of men who lugged hundreds of pounds of this stuff across mountains and deserts, thinking they were rich."

"I wonder if that man—er—Jake—thought he'd found gold. Maybe that's why he was so anxious to locate Joe Turner."

"Could be," said Brady.

"But if that's the case, why didn't he take those samples with him?"

Probably didn't want to call our attention to 'em. Maybe he figured we wouldn't look inside the cabin, or if we did look in, we wouldn't notice that stuff."

"That's obviously it." Smythe's eyes studied the sky. Though still overcast, the threat of rain had diminished. "I think I'll change my plans," he said. "I'm going back to Timber City today."

"Not stayin' here overnight?"

Smythe shook his head. "I'm going to find out more about this man who calls himself Jake."

The lawyer fancied himself a smart man. He already had suspicions about the stranger's actions. He felt confident that there was something that the stranger was trying to conceal, but he was far from

guessing the real truth about the man who called himself Jake.

Smythe would have been a very surprised man if he had seen the stranger a few minutes after leaving the cabin. He would have seen that man in the ill-fitting clothes mount a big, fine-looking horse that was waiting in a copse near by. He would have recognized the horse as "Champ." Then if he had deduced that the stranger was none other than Gene Autry in disguise, he would have been right.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SOFT TALK

Before Smythe could leave the lumber camp he had to go over certain details with Brady. He squirmed impatiently while the conference was in progress and hurried through instructions and details as quickly as possible. The afternoon was well advanced when the lawyer left the camp and darkness had fallen by the time he reached Timber City. He returned the rented horse to the livery stable. Then, instead of going to his home or office, he went directly to the saloon where Baldy Jennings stood back of the bar.

"Well!" exclaimed Baldy. "Look who's here. It ain't often we have the honor of your company, Mr. Smythe."

"I didn't come here to provide you with my company," returned the lawyer sharply. "I'm looking for someone."

"How about a drink?"

Smythe's eyes darted at the many tables in the smoke-filled room. He shook his head and said, "No, thanks." Then he saw Joe Turner. "Turner is still here, eh?"

"Yep. Poor galoot comes here every day an' stays

all day. I been tryin' to get him to eat somethin', but he won't do it. Does nothin' but sit. I dunno how much longer he c'n keep goin'."

Smythe saw the man called Jake seated across the table from Joe Turner. "Who's that man with Joe?" he asked.

"I dunno. I never saw the critter before. Looks to me like a drifter. Joe's willin' to talk to anyone that'll listen to his woes."

"How long has that man been in here?"

"He came in about an hour ago. He asked about Joe Turner an' I pointed Joe out. He went over an' stood talkin' fer a minute. Then he sat down an' the two o' them have been talkin' ever since."

"What're they talking about?"

Baldy shook his head. "Y'got me," he replied. "They been talkin' in mighty low tones. I ain't been able to hear anything they say. I got some ideas, though."

Smythe turned toward Baldy. "You," he said, "have ideas?"

Baldy nodded. "I think he's tryin' to sell Joe somethin'."

"What makes you think so?"

"He's been doin' an awful lot of talkin'. At first Joe wasn't much interested. Then, as the stranger kept goin', Joe began listenin' real careful. From time tuh time I see him nod his head."

"I see."

"Maybe the stranger heard that Joe got a piece of cash out of you as the down payment on his land. Maybe he's tryin' to get a piece of it fer himself."

Smythe looked toward the table again. He saw the stranger with the ragged clothes draw a few pieces of rock out of his pocket. He pointed to certain characteristics of the rock, then passed it to Joe.

Joe Turner's eyes lost their dull, glazed appearance. He studied the bits of rock very carefully. Then both he and the stranger bent low over the table and engaged in a whispered conversation that lasted for several minutes. The man who was not recognized as Gene Autry rose, shook hands with Joe Turner, and left the table. He sauntered to another corner of the room near the kitchen, picked up a menu, and ordered a meal.

Joe Turner looked toward the bar and saw Smythe. He raised his hand and beckoned. Then he called, "Hey, Smythe, come here a second."

Smythe glanced at the bartender, winked, then moved to Joe Turner's table. "How are you, Joe?" he said.

"Smythe, I reckon I said some pretty strong things the other day in the sheriff's office."

Smythe nodded and said, "You certainly did."

"Is it too late fer me tuh make apologies?"

With an oily smile the lawyer said, "Don't worry

about it. I knew you were steamed up at the time."

"You ain't holdin' them things I said against me?"

"A lawyer makes a lot of temporary enemies, Joe. If I held a grudge against everyone that called me names, I wouldn't be speaking to anyone."

"Sit down a minute."

Smythe seated himself in the chair that had recently been vacated by the stranger.

"Look here, Smythe," Joe said. "I know I ain't in a position to ask no favors of you—"

"I told you that the past was dead, Joe. What can I do for you?"

Joe held out a small piece of the rock. "Look at this," he said.

Smythe took the chunk and turned it this way and that, studying all sides carefully. "What about it?"

"See that yellow stuff in there?"

"Yes. It's iron pyrites. That's the technical term. It's generally called 'Fool's Gold.'"

"Sh-h-h," cautioned Joe Turner. "Not so loud. I don't want that man at the other table to hear what we say."

"Who is he?"

"I dunno much about him. He came in here and started talkin' to me. He thinks this stuff is gold ore."

"He does, eh?"

"Look," Joe said with an edge of tension in his voice. "He thinks I still own the land on Dipper Creek. He wants to buy it from me."

"Is that where this stuff came from?" asked the lawyer, pointing to the nuggets on the table.

Joe nodded.

"He doesn't know you've sold that land to me?"

"No."

"Why didn't you tell him?"

"Now wait a minute, Smythe. Listen to me."

"I'm listening."

"You put a pretty raw deal over on me, but I'll overlook that if you give me the chance to get a little something out of the land. I can sell some of that Dipper Creek property to the stranger."

"You'd be misrepresenting if you told him there was gold in the land," Smythe said guardedly.

"I ain't told him a thing. He done all the talkin'."

"You'd be swindling him, wouldn't you?"

Joe frowned darkly at the attorney. "Look here, Smythe," he said. "You needn't talk so high an' mighty with me. You know doggoned well that there'd be nothin' in the deal that'd be jail trouble. If he wants to buy a piece of land an' wants it bad enough to pay a fancy price for it, that's his business. I didn't tell him that stuff he had was gold ore. I said it might be gold an' it might not be gold. In fact, when he suggested goin' partners with me, I

told him I wasn't interested. I told him I didn't think the stuff was worth anything. Then he said, that bein' the case, maybe I'd sell a little strip of the land to him."

"What'd you tell him?"

"Said I'd think it over."

"You didn't tell him that you no longer own the land?"

"I told him I'd think it over, an' that's all."

"Has he got any cash?" asked the lawyer.

"He's carryin' five hundred dollars in cash with him. He may have more. I don't know about that."

Smythe became cunning. "You've given me some interesting information," he said. "Why should I permit you to sell the land? I control it. I can sell direct to him, couldn't I?" Smythe watched Joe Turner carefully. He wondered how much law the old man knew. Joe could, if he chose to do so, block the deal until the balance had been paid on the timberland and the deed and title transferred to J. Middleton Smythe. Of this, however, Joe seemed ignorant.

"You wouldn't do that," he whined, "would yuh?"

"Why not?"

"Aw, now look here, Mr. Smythe, you already put a fast deal over on me. Five hundred dollars don't mean nothin' to a man in your position. You're goin' to make a fortune on the timber you're takin' off the

land an' you ain't a-goin' to have to pay me a nickel for it. Why don't you gimme the chance to make a deal with this stranger an' get a little piece of money?"

"I'll have a talk with the stranger," Smythe said noncommittally. "If he really wants to buy some land, I might let you in on a little piece of the cash."

"But that ain't fair," whined Joe.

Smythe smiled at Turner. "You," he said, "have a lot to learn about business."

"It seems more like sharpshootin' than business."

"You stay right here, Turner. I'll go and talk to that man and if I can close a deal I'll take care of you." Smythe pushed back from the table and moved toward the man called Jake.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A DEAL IS CLOSED

When a platter of food was placed before Gene Autry, he realized that his disguise caused unforeseen difficulties. Despite the fact that most of his meals were self-prepared and eaten in solitude beside his campfire, he always observed the proper use of knife, fork and spoon. Now he was confronted with the problem of eating in a manner that would match his disguise. His problem was further complicated by the fact that J. Middleton Smythe sat at the table with him. He knew that Smythe was nobody's fool. The lawyer was sharp. His career was founded upon his ability to observe and interpret small details in people's manners.

Gene knew that, to conform to the character he had created for himself, he should pile the food on his knife and use this to convey it to his mouth. The accomplishment of this, however, was something that required long practice. An inspiration helped him solve the problem. He cut the slab of beefsteak into small pieces and did the same with a large boiled potato. Then he laid the knife and fork aside. He winked at Smythe and said, "Y'know, a lot of galoots don't know a thing about the right way to

handle their grub. They shovel it in on the blade of their knife."

Smythe nodded with amusement.

"Me, I'm different," Gene went on. "Y'don't see me makin' mistakes like that. I learned the right way to eat." He picked up the spoon. "A spoon's the thing to use," he said. "A lot of dumb galoots think a spoon's just somethin' to stir your coffee with."

The lawyer made a patronizing comment. Then he said, "I am glad that I happened to find you here. You left that shack on Dipper Creek before I had a chance to explain my position. You see, I bought that land from Joe Turner."

"Is that so?" replied Gene.

Smythe nodded.

"Joe Turner didn't tell me he'd sold his land."

"Well, he has."

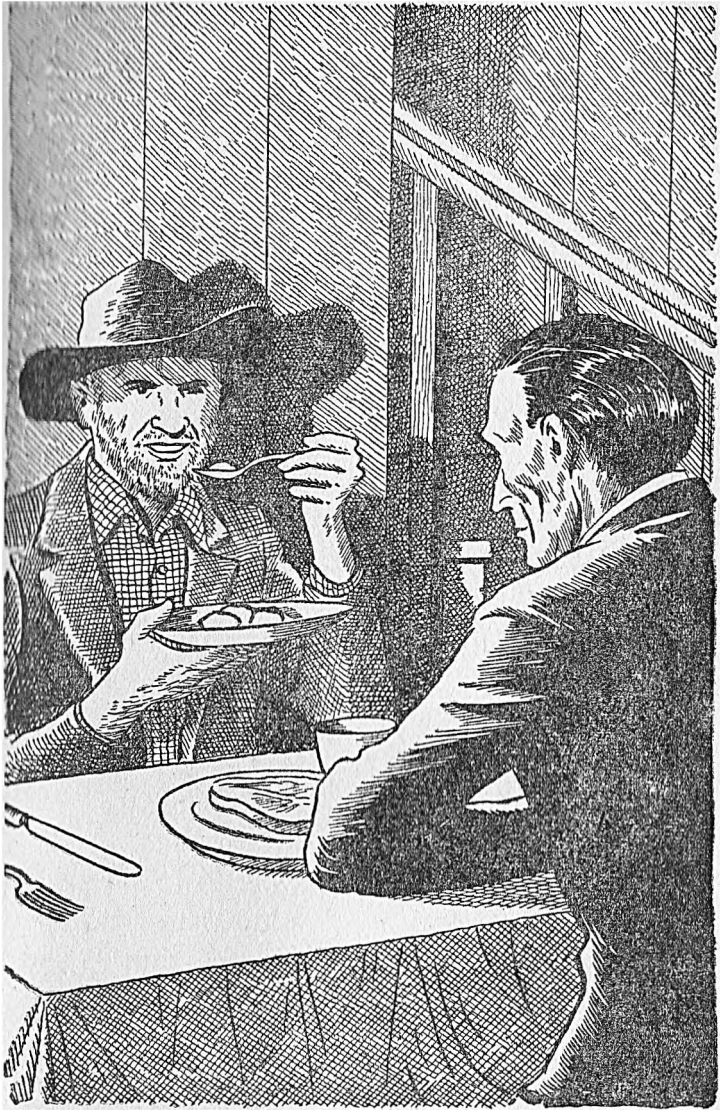
"That accounts for it. I wondered why the timber was bein' cut. I didn't think old Joe would ever get around to cuttin' timber. So it's you that's doin' it, eh?"

"That's right," Smythe said.

Gene paused and forced a heavy frown to his bearded face. He laid down his spoon and scratched his chin reflectively. "That doggoned skinflint. I bet he was tryin' to put one over on me."

"Who?"

"Joe Turner. I told him I was interested in buyin'



"A Spoon's the Thing to Use," He Said

a little strip of land along the creek. He told me that maybe we could make some sort of deal."

"He can't sell you that land, Jake. He's already sold it to me."

"Now, what d'you know about that?" Gene said in an offended tone. "I bet he figured he could put one over on me. Probably thought he'd buy the land back from you, then resell it to me."

Smythe nodded. "That," he said, "is just about what he figured. No matter what he paid me for the land, he'd charge you a higher price."

"Skinflint," grumbled Gene.

"Why do you want to buy that land?"

"The reason I want it don't enter into it. I like the view. Maybe I want tuh live in Joe's cabin. Maybe I like fishin' in that particular creek. There's a lot of reasons why I might want it."

"The price might be too steep for you," hinted Smythe.

"Might. Then again it might not. Suppose you name the price, then I'll tell you."

"Five thousand dollars."

Gene shook his head energetically. "You," he said, "are plain loco."

"I thought you wanted that land."

"I do. But not at any such fancy price as that. The land's no good to you. You've already cleared away all the timber that's worth cuttin'. All that's left is

second an' third growth stuff that won't be cuttin' size for another fifty years."

"What do you consider a fair price?"

"It's your land. Put a price on it, but shave it away down from five thousand."

"Three thousand?"

"I said *away* down!"

"For example."

"Take away one of those ciphers. Make it three hundred instead of three thousand and we'll talk business."

"Three hundred!" exclaimed Smythe in an injured tone. "That's preposterous."

"I don't see why it is. There's aplenty of land around here that can be bought for five an' six dollars an acre. Lots of land for less than that. All I want is a few acres. Just a strip along the creek, maybe a hundred yards wide."

"I might," said Smythe slowly, watching Gene Autry's face, "go as low as a thousand dollars, but that's rock bottom."

Again Gene Autry shook his head. "A thousand dollars," he said, "is just about twice as much as I can spend." He sighed deeply. "If that's your bottom price, I reckon I'll have to forget my idea."

Smythe intended to get whatever he could out of the gullible-acting newcomer. He had no intention of letting five hundred dollars slip through his

greedy fingers. But he wasn't going to settle for that if there was any chance to get more.

"Tell you what I'll do," he said. "I'll split the difference with you. I asked for a thousand and you'll pay five hundred."

"I didn't say that. I said I'd pay three hundred."

"Five hundred."

Gene shook his head again. "What I said was this. I said I *had* five hundred dollars!"

"I'll sell you the land you want for seven fifty. A strip that's bounded by the property line on each side, extending from the creek one hundred yards up the hill."

"You'd sell that for seven fifty?"

Smythe nodded. "Is it a deal?"

"Not yet. I'll buy the land from you at that price, but I haven't got seven hundred and fifty dollars. If you'd take seven fifty for a strip a hundred yards from the creek, you should be willing to take five hundred for a strip about sixty-five yards. That would come out about the same."

"Oh—all right," replied Smythe. "I'll take it."

"Good."

"Give me the money and I'll draw up a bill of sale."

"I'll pay when I see the bill of sale and the deed."

"I'll have everything ready in the morning."

"That's when I'll pay."

"How do I know you'll be here?" demanded the lawyer.

"I'll give you fifty dollars as a deposit. I guess you know I won't run out on the deal with fifty dollars invested in it."

"That'll do."

Smythe scribbled a receipt on the back of a business card and handed it to Gene in exchange for fifty dollars in cash. The two shook hands and agreed to meet in the lawyer's office the following morning.

Smythe was well pleased with the way events had developed. There were certain details that had to be attended to before he could give Gene Autry a title to the land. He had to get a clear title from Joe Turner.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

POTENTIAL DYNAMITE

J. Middleton Smythe approached the door of his office at precisely nine o'clock in the morning. He unlocked the door and went inside. Sitting at his desk, he drew a folded sheet of paper from his inside pocket and spread it out on the blotter. Following the words with his fingers, he read the paper slowly and carefully, studying each word to make sure there was no detail that was lacking. It had taken two hours of his time on the preceding evening, as well as fifty dollars in cash to get that paper signed by Joe Turner.

Joe had balked at selling the land described. He claimed that he'd already made one deal with Smythe and that his entire holdings had been sold. He didn't see any reason to split the land and give a clear title and deed to a narrow strip along the creek while the remainder of the land would not be paid for until another five months had passed.

Smythe had finally succeeded in persuading Joe to see his point of view. The deal had been closed and the papers signed and witnessed. Though Smythe had made only a down payment on most of the hillside land, he owned that narrow strip,

lock, stock and barrel. He was ready for the man who called himself Jake.

He didn't have long to wait. Gene Autry walked into the office of the lawyer, garbed as he had been on the previous day. His face was bristling with the same beard.

Smythe greeted his visitor with a smile. "I'm ready for you," he said. "Did you bring the cash?"

Gene nodded and sat down in a leather chair.

"First of all," the lawyer said, "you'll want to be sure that I am the owner of the property I'm about to transfer."

"That's right."

"Here are the papers. There's the deed," touching one paper, "and here is the search and survey."

Gene picked up the documents and read them carefully. Though they were worded in the somewhat confusing way that lawyers have, he knew that they were in order. The land to be transferred was carefully described and bounded. Joe Turner's signature was authentic and so were the signatures of the witnesses. He nodded and returned the blue-bound documents.

"I have this bill of sale prepared," Smythe said as he drew another piece of typing from his desk. "It's ready for signing whenever you hand over the money."

"We should have some witnesses, shouldn't we?"

asked Gene innocently.

"All taken care of. I asked Sheriff Lawson and his deputy to drop in this morning. They'll be here any minute."

"They're the ones who witnessed Joe's signature?"

Smythe nodded.

"You," said Gene pointedly, "are a pretty slick dealer, ain't you, Smythe?"

"What do you mean?"

"When I talked to you last night you didn't even have the title to this land."

"Who said so?"

"Look at the date of your agreement with Turner. You got the land from him after we talked terms, didn't you?"

Smythe smiled in a worldly wise way. "To be perfectly frank," he said, "I didn't have a title to the land when we made our deal. On the other hand, neither did Joe. Neither one of us could have sold that land to you."

"It doesn't matter," Gene said.

Sheriff Lawson and the deputy came through the door. "What's this thing you want us to witness?" demanded the lawman.

"Just a land transfer, that's all," explained the lawyer.

The formalities were brief. Smythe assigned his property to one Jacob Jones, a name that Gene gave

with an enigmatic smile. "I suppose it don't matter much," he said, "if it's my right name?"

The sheriff had long ago got used to men who traveled under names that were not their own. In fact, in the early days of that country it was generally said that "most men leave their names east of the Mississippi." Countless land deals had been made by men who, for one reason or another, chose to conceal their true identity.

The papers were signed and witnessed, the money handed over to Smythe, who counted it carefully. He handed a five-dollar bill to the sheriff and the deputy for their services as witnesses, then rose to his feet. "I guess that concludes negotiations," he said. "Thanks for everything."

Gene and the two lawmen left the office with mysterious smiles on their faces. The lawyer, gloating over the easy profit of four hundred dollars, assumed that the sheriff and the deputy were happy with the easily earned five-dollar bills. He interpreted Gene's smile as one of happiness that would quickly be shattered when he learned that the yellow stuff was nothing but fool's gold.

The lawyer didn't suspect that his own shrewdness had been turned into a weapon against him. He didn't know that the document that Gene Autry carried out of his office was potential dynamite that was soon to explode in his face.

Gene Autry, in his strange make-up, went with the lawmen to the sheriff's office. There Joe Turner was waiting nervously.

"Did everything go off all right?" he demanded.

"Smooth as silk," replied Gene. "And now we have another little deal to set up and then I'm going to get into some decent clothes and get this fake hair off my face."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

THE DYNAMITE EXPLODES

Smythe swore when, a few days after closing the land deal with "Jacob Jones," he received a message from the Dipper Creek camp. The message was brief and merely stated that he'd better go to the camp and see Brady as soon as possible.

Smythe had no choice. He started out soon after breakfast on a rented horse and spent a few miserable hours in travel. He sensed, as he neared the camp, that something must be radically wrong. He heard no sound but the clump of hoofs that came from the horse he rode. There was no sound of axe or saw—no chugging of the donkey engine. The terrifying screech of logs shooting down the flume was absent.

Riding along the edge of the creek, Smythe saw smoke coming from the chimney of the cabin that had gone with the land to Jacob Jones. Then, looking beyond the cabin, Smythe saw that which gave him a peculiar feeling in the pit of his stomach. It wasn't exactly what he saw that caused his apprehension. It was what he did not see.

The flume, a trough of wood that had extended from the camp, high up in the timber, to the creek

itself, now ended abruptly about sixty yards from the creek. The sight of the amputated flume was one that brought visions of legal issues to the lawyer's mind. Even so, the full significance of the situation was not to come until later.

He neared the cabin as Joe Turner stepped out and waved cheerily. "Hi, there," Joe shouted. "We've been expectin' yuh, Smythe. We're all in my shack waitin' for yuh."

Smythe reined up and said, "What do you mean?"

"Come on inside an' find out. We got a little surprise in my shack."

"It isn't your shack, it belongs to a man called Jones."

Joe grinned happily and said, "You'll hear all about that in a few minutes. Brady is inside, sore as a boiled owl."

Brady, at that moment, appeared at the door. His face was livid and distorted with rage. He was almost inarticulate when he demanded that Smythe come in and see what had happened.

"What *has* happened?" the lawyer demanded.

"You confounded, addle-headed fool," cried the boss of the camp. "Wait'll you see what you've done to us!"

The room was small and there were men enough to crowd it. Sheriff Lawson and his deputy were there, both wearing wide grins as they greeted Law-

yet Smythe, Joe Turner and Brady were there. So were two of the minor executives from the camp. There was a dignified man of middle age, whose bearing and appearance signified a successful man who knew his business well. He was introduced as Gordon Cartwright. Smythe recognized the name. Cartwright was one of the most brilliant attorneys in that part of the country. He was a man whose thorough knowledge of the law and shrewd courtroom tactics had given him an enormous reputation. After Smythe withdrew his limp, moist hand from the grip of the famous lawyer, he saw another man in the room. It was Gene Autry who sat there in a corner, smiling genially at Smythe's discomfiture.

"Wha—what is this all about?" demanded Smythe.

"You!" bellowed Brady. "You sold us out."

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Maybe you don't know about sellin' a strip of land to a critter by the name o' Jones."

"What of it?"

"He sold the same land to Joe Turner!"

"What?" exploded Smythe.

"That's right," grinned Joe. "I got a clear title to a strip of land along the creek."

"B-But you sold that land to me," stammered the lawyer.

"I didn't have a complete clear title to it then," explained Joe. "I cleaned that up by sellin' to you."

Then you sold to another gent an' he sold it to me. Mr. Cartwright says my claim is good an' it'll stand up in any court in the country."

"W-Well wh-what about it?" Smythe faltered.

"Nothin' much," Joe said. "It's my land an' that don't affect the land you're holdin' in the least. You can go right ahead an' cut all the timber you want. Cut it *all* an' I can't stop you."

Smythe, his reassurance badly shaken, looked at Brady and said, "If that's true, why aren't your men at work? What's wrong?"

"Wait'll you hear the rest," snarled Brady.

Smythe looked at Joe Turner.

"Cut all yuh want," Joe repeated, "only don't bring none of it across my land."

"He's cut the flume," said one of the other men from the camp.

"Yep. I cut 'er down. It bothered me to hear those logs shoot down. Besides, I didn't see why I should let your flume run over my land."

"We can't get timber out without crossing the land you sold to this fool!" explained Brady. "There's no way in the world to get it out without trespassing on Turner's land!"

Turner grinned and said, "I reckon that's right."

"B-But there m-must be some way! Look here, Turner," the lawyer said. "If it's a case of paying you for the privilege of crossing your land with the

flume—”

“It ain’t a privilege that’s for sale,” said Joe.

Brady’s face registered something close to panic. “Maybe you know what you can tell the big boss to explain the failure of this job, but I’m hanged if I know what I can tell him.”

Smythe grew perceptibly paler.

“You know what happens to men that fail him, don’t you?” went on Brady. “What happened to Disbro, and Danahy, and Zachery! That’s what’ll happen to us! To you an’ me!”

“I—I never suspected a plot like this,” gasped Smythe. “I—I thought that old fool would find there was no gold here and then pull stakes.”

“He never intended tuh look for gold! The whole thing was a trap that Gene Autry set up. He had Joe Turner instructed as tuh his part. He had the sheriff an’ the deputy in on the know. And you fell for their act like a sucker, swallowin’ the bait, hook, line, and sinker!” Brady turned to Joe. “Look here, Joe. What do you want? We admit that we’re up against the wall. We admit you’ve got us where you can put the pressure on. What do you want from us?”

Joe said, “I reckon yuh better talk to Gene Autry. He can tell yuh what I want.”

Gene rose and stepped forward. “It isn’t a great deal,” he said. “Joe wants no more than he was

promised."

"What's that?" demanded Smythe.

"You and Turner made a deal. You agreed to a certain price that you would pay for his property. I'll admit that the price was high. It was quite a bit more than the land was worth, but you fixed it yourself."

"I—I agreed to p-pay in five months," the lawyer said.

"That's perfectly all right," replied Gene. "Joe will wait five months."

"Then we can go ahead and move the timber?" asked the lawyer quickly.

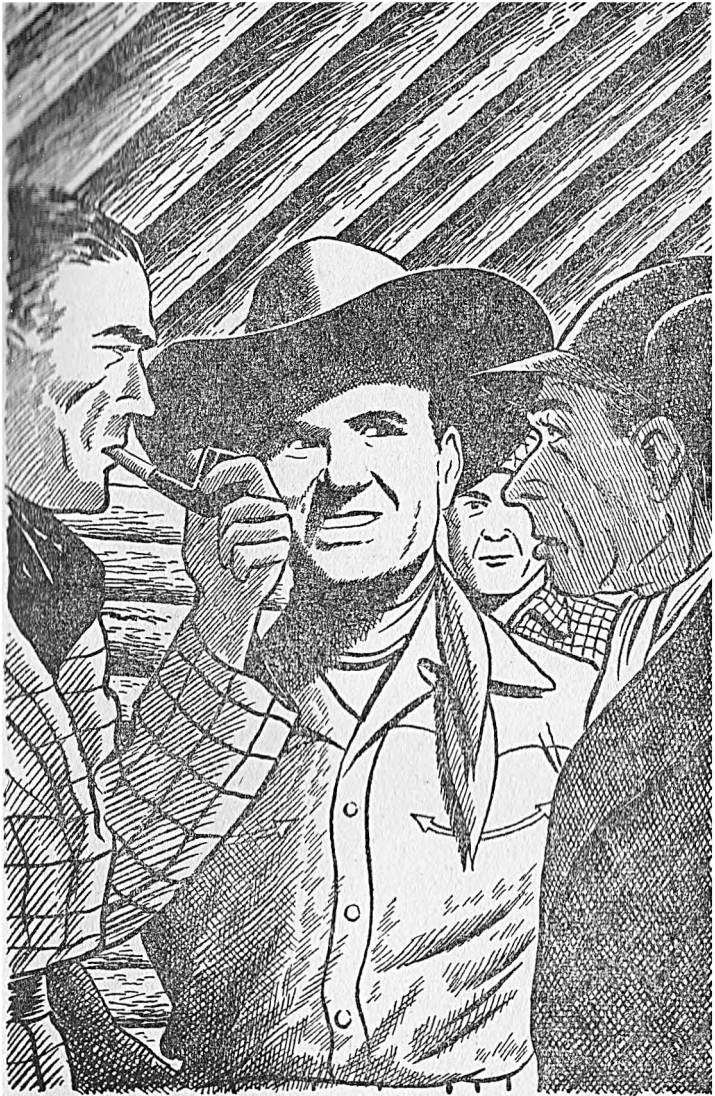
Gene shook his head. "Hardly that. You can move the timber after you've paid Joe Turner the balance of the money."

"An' not a doggoned minute before!" added Turner.

Smythe looked helplessly from one man to the other. He saw nothing in anyone's face that suggested a solution. He turned to Cartwright. "C-Can they really do this to me?" he asked.

Cartwright nodded. "They certainly can!" he said flatly.

"You've got to scrape up the balance of that cash and pay Turner," stated Brady. "That's all there is to it! You've got to do it out of your own pocket. The boss'll never make up that money."



"You and Turner Made a Deal!"

"It—it'll break me!"

"Then you'll have to go broke!"

"I won't do it," cried J. Middleton Smythe. "I won't give every dime I have in the world to this dirty scheme!"

Gene Autry broke in. "I didn't finish," he said. "There's something else that will have to be handed over before Joe Turner will let you cross his land."

All eyes were on Gene. He said slowly, "We'll have to have the name of the man who poisoned Danahy and Zachery."

Smythe gasped audibly and Brady's face went white. "Y-You don't mean that?" Smythe whispered.

Gene nodded and said, "Yes, I do."

For a moment, while Gene was the focal point of all eyes, no one noticed Smythe. The lawyer became unsteady on his feet. He staggered back half a step, then his knees bent and he crumpled to the floor.

Gene Autry was the first to reach his side. A brief examination told him that Smythe had merely fainted. He passed this on to the others and asked Joe to get a cup of water.

"It's too bad he's just fainted," growled Brady. "The schemin', sharpshootin' polecat! For a few hundred dollars he let us all in on this mess." Brady suddenly turned to Gene. "Look here, Autry," he said, "I know when I'm up against a situation I can't lick! If I don't get that timber, I'll get the same

as a few others got! I'll get murdered."

"By whom?"

"That's about the only thing I haven't been able to learn. There's big money and big power back of the syndicate. I don't know who the head man is. But Smythe knows! Smythe can tell! It was Smythe that carried out orders to poison the food of those two that died in the jail."

This announcement created a stir in the room.

Brady went on. "I'm not goin' to get into this any deeper than I am already. I'm a lumberman. That's all I am. I didn't like this deal in the first place an' I like it even less now."

"How do you know that Smythe is the poisoner?" asked Gene.

"I know a lot of things that I learned by askin' questions an' keepin' my eyes an' ears open. Smythe got the poison through the mail. He went to the restaurant an' dropped it into the coffee. If you want some proof of that, look in his desk. The chances are you'll find more of the same poison in case he has to get rid of someone else!"

A few moments later, J. Middleton Smythe opened his eyes. He heard the sheriff's voice. The sheriff was putting him under arrest on a charge of murder!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

SMYTHE'S WAY OUT

Timber City was rocked to its very foundations by the happenings of the next few days. The sequence of startling events began when a small cavalcade rode into town at sunset. J. Middleton Smythe, flanked by Sheriff Lawson and his top deputy, led the way. Behind these three came Gene Autry and Gordon Cartwright, the well-known attorney from San Francisco. Cartwright, attired in fine riding clothes, sat his horse like an Easterner, with his back stiff as a ramrod, his knees firm against the horse's sides, his left hand gripping the reins and his general appearance one of imposing dignity.

Brady rode behind the San Francisco attorney, his face grim in contrast to the man at his side. Joe Turner wore a grin that spread over his whole face and he waved happily to everyone as he passed down Timber City's main street.

The horsemen went directly to the jail with fifteen or twenty townsmen following. The first big surprise came to the townspeople when it became apparent that J. Middleton Smythe was to occupy the prison cell. Smythe was plainly nervous as he

dismounted before the building that combined the sheriff's office and the jail. Then suddenly he went utterly to pieces. He sobbed and pleaded, begged and cajoled. He cried out in abject fear, screaming that to jail him was to mark him for death. Sheriff Lawson gripped Smythe's right arm and the deputy, the left. They dragged the struggling, squirming, terror-stricken wretch into the office. Lawson whipped out a key and unlocked the door of the cell.

"This isn't legal!" protested the lawyer. "It's not right! It's not justice! You can't execute me without a trial! You've got to give me my day in court! You've got to prove that I'm the poisoner!"

"You'll get your day in court," the sheriff said grimly.

"I won't!" slobbered the captive. "I won't get it! I'll be poisoned! I'll be killed! The boss will send someone to kill me just as he ordered me to poison Danahy and Zachery."

Sheriff Lawson grabbed a handful of Smythe's shirt and jerked the broken man erect. "Listen to me," he barked. "Maybe I should've told you, Smythe. Bein' under arrest for murder, anything you say can be used against you."

"I don't care!" wailed Smythe. "Don't lock me up! They'll get me!"

"Who will?"

"The boss!"

"Smythe!" the sheriff said. "Listen to me a minute!"

Smythe was unheeding. He broke into a fit of hysterical sobbing. Lawson gave him an open-handed slap on the left side of his face. "Now listen!" he said. "You just said that you poisoned those two that were in jail. D'you realize that you said that?"

"It doesn't matter," sniffled the lawyer. "If you lock me up, the boss will kill me before I can get into a trial court."

"Who is the boss?"

"I c-can't tell you. I c-can't tell anything."

"If you're so all-fired sure he'll get you, don't you think your best chance is to give us his name so's we can deal with him?"

"You can't deal with him and neither can anyone else. He's too big. He's too powerful. He has his agents everywhere. He has spies all over. He knows everything that goes on." Smythe looked wildly around the sheriff's office. "Maybe he's got spies right here in this room. Don't lock me in the jail. Take me somewhere in hiding." He fell to his knees, begging and pleading.

Sheriff Lawson looked at the men around him as if uncertain what to do. Disgust was stamped on every face. It was Gene Autry who finally spoke.

He suggested that Smythe be locked up until he regained control of himself. "Then we can decide what to do," he finished.

Lawson nodded and followed Gene's suggestion. Two hours later, J. Middleton Smythe was dead.

There was no mystery surrounding the death of J. Middleton Smythe. For half an hour after being locked in the cell, he lay on the bunk and sobbed heavily. For the next thirty minutes he lay still, apparently asleep but, in reality, deep in thought. When he arose, he seemed to have regained a great measure of composure. He asked for water and drank several cups. Then he asked the guard if he might speak to Sheriff Lawson.

"Glad to see that you've got a grip on yourself," the sheriff said, as he stood talking through the iron bars of the cell. "Why'd you send for me, Smythe?"

Smythe's voice was low and well-controlled. "Made a fool of myself, didn't I?" he asked.

"Worse'n that."

"I want to know just what the situation is. What sort of a case have you against me?"

"Just about airtight. We found some arsenic in your office. We also found some notes you'd made, and your account book showing that you got some pretty big chunks of money—money that no one in this town could afford to pay you. What's more, those payments you got were dated to tie right in

with a few things that happened around here—such as buyin' Joe Turner's land, and the killin' of Danahy and his pal. On top of that, you admitted poisoning those two."

"Before witnesses?"

"You know blame well who was in the office when you broke down. There was me an' my deputy, Brady, Gene Autry, Joe Turner, an' that big lawyer from San Francisco."

"How did he happen to be around?"

"Gene Autry sent for him to be sure there was no slip-up in the deal that gave Joe Turner back his land."

Smythe nodded slowly. "In that event," he said, "I'm as good as convicted of a double murder."

"You'll have a chance to plead your case before a jury," the sheriff promised. "Maybe if you turn state's evidence and tell who gave you your orders, you'll get off with twenty years or life instead of the death penalty."

"Sheriff," said Smythe. "I want to do some writing."

"Writing?"

"I—uh—I want to prepare my defense."

"Oh," muttered the sheriff in a disappointed voice. "I hoped you'd write out a lot of information about this lumber syndicate."

"Maybe I shall."

"I'll send some paper an' pencils in to you."

"Wait, Sheriff Lawson."

"Well?"

"I'd like my fountain pen. The one that's in the center drawer of my desk. The thick one. Do you mind?"

"Don't make no difference to me," the sheriff said. "I'll send it in to you."

A few minutes later Smythe was handed a pad of ruled paper and a bulky fountain pen. A curious, faraway look came into his eyes as he received the pen between the iron bars of the door. "Now, Sheriff," he said, "I'll show you a trick that may surprise you."

"Eh?" said the puzzled lawman. He watched Smythe unscrew the cap of the pen. Then he realized that he'd been duped as Smythe stuck the pen into his mouth and lifted the little gold lever that depressed the rubber sac.

Lawson yelled, "Stop that!" He clawed at the door. Then he fitted the key into the lock with a hand that trembled. He jerked the door open and charged at Smythe, but too late.

The pen dropped to the floor as Lawson grabbed the lawyer. "You crazy fool," the lawman shouted. "What'd you do? What was in that pen? Answer me!"

The lawyer smiled without mirth. "Sheriff," he

said slowly, "my poison is painless." His eyelids fluttered and his legs went limp. Lawson tore from the building without bothering to lock the door of the cell. He was back in a few minutes with the doctor. The doctor bent over the form on the cell floor for less than two minutes. When he looked up at Lawson there was no uncertainty in his voice. "This man is dead."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

A MAN WITH A GUN

After the suicide of J. Middleton Smythe a series of strange legal maneuvers excited the little town of Timber City. Well-dressed strangers who, in some unexplained way, had learned of the lawyer's death began arriving on the morning after the suicide. They went about their business with precision and dispatch. They visited the courthouse, the bank, the lawyer's office, and the land office. They were closeted with the judge and various other public officials.

Gene Autry tried to talk to some of these men. They were polite, but they were aloof and non-committal. They kept their business strictly to themselves. It wasn't until the strangers had left that Gene realized the purpose of their visit and the efficiency with which they had carried out their mission. They had closed the book on Smythe's business dealings. They had performed some sort of legal sleight-of-hand that transferred Smythe's claim on the Dipper Creek land to a dummy corporation known simply as the "Dipper Creek Lumber Company." Money from some unknown source went into the bank in the name of the newly formed com-

pany and a check was handed to Joe Turner in full payment for the land he had owned. In return Joe handed over the deed, not only to the timberland, but also to the narrow strip on which his cabin stood.

Then normalcy returned. Smythe was buried; Brady returned to Dipper Creek with orders to rebuild the flume and resume operations. Gordon Cartwright entrained for San Francisco, and Joe Turner settled himself in the best room in Callie Tucker's boarding house to live on his sudden wealth.

Gene Autry remained in Timber City. He knew that one mysterious figure controlled the lawyers and businessmen who had appeared in town immediately following Smythe's death. He also knew that a clue to the identity of this ruthless leader of the redwood syndicate must lie somewhere in the mass of documents that had accumulated during the bewildering legal operations. He examined corporation papers, deeds, land transfers, tax reports, and countless other papers. He talked to everyone who had had any dealings with the visitors, but he got nowhere. He felt that he was fighting in the dark. He had the nightmarish impression that he was moving through a labyrinth—that no matter where he turned his way was blocked by an insurmountable stone wall.

For Gene Autry this was an unfamiliar form of battle. He was fighting an unknown enemy whose main defense was anonymity—an enemy who was guarded by men who so feared his power that, like Smythe, they preferred death to the punishment he was capable of administering.

After a week of utterly wasted effort Gene sat alone in his hotel room, trying to think of a new angle of attack. It was then that he received a phone call from the Double T ranch.

Thad Tyler's voice boomed heartily across the miles of wire. It was good to hear from Tyler.

"How did you locate me?" Gene asked.

"It wasn't easy," laughed the millionaire. "I had the long-distance operators almost loco trying to find you. Had 'em calling every lumber camp in the redwood region. Finally got hold of a man at the Chicapoo camp and he said you'd gone to Timber City. So that's where I found you. How're things going?"

Gene ran over his experiences as briefly as possible. When he was finished, he said, "I'm glad you called, Thad, because you may be able to help me."

"Glad to do anything I can, Gene," replied the voice in the receiver. "What do you want?"

"I want the name of the man who's behind the redwood syndicate."

"Are you still convinced that there's one big out-

fit in control of the redwood industry?"

"More convinced than ever. It's not only an illegal monopoly, Thad, it's an outfit that's already gone as far as murder to keep out of the spotlight."

There was a perceptible pause before Tyler replied. "Look, Gene," he said, "we haven't seen much of each other in these past years, but I think you know that I'm a man of influence."

"I know you are."

"I carry a lot of weight in certain places. I've swung a lot of big deals. Now it stands to reason that I can get facts if anyone can get them, doesn't it?"

"No argument about that, Thad. What are you getting at?"

"Just this. After you left my place, I thought I'd look into the situation you'd mentioned. I did a little checking up."

"You did?"

"Yes. And if there was any monopoly such as you're looking for, I'd have learned about it."

"You mean to say—"

"Gene," cut in Tyler, "you're off on a blind trail this time. You're barking up the wrong tree."

"You mean to say no racket exists?"

"That's exactly what I mean to say."

"But those men who were murdered! What about them?"

"I don't know anything about them."

"They were killed to keep them from talking."

"How do you know why they were killed?" asked Tyler. "You're just assuming that that was the motive. You told me a few minutes ago that J. M. Smythe killed them."

"He poisoned them. But he was acting on orders from someone else."

"That's another assumption. Of course it's possible that Smythe was trying to start a monopoly, but I doubt it. He wasn't a big man. He couldn't have been or I'd have known about him."

"But, Thad," Gene argued, "someone put up the cash to pay off Joe Turner and maintain Dipper Creek camp."

"I thought you said there was a corporation in control of the Dipper Creek project."

"There is."

"In that case the cash probably came from the stockholders."

"I can't even find out who the stockholders are."

"Tell you what you do, Gene. Come on down to the Double T ranch for a few days. Rest up and take it easy. While you're here I'll see if I can't get a line on the Dipper Creek Corporation for you."

"If you could do that, I'd appreciate it, Thad."

"I'll try."

"Send me word if you learn anything."

"You're not going to stick around Timber City, are you?"

"For the time being."

"Come and visit me. Mother's been asking about you. She'd like to know you better."

"I'd like to see her again, Thad, and maybe I can visit you when I get this job finished. But not right now."

"Why not?" demanded Thad Tyler.

"I've been poking around here," Gene explained. "Maybe I've stirred things up enough so the man I'm after will be a little worried. He may stick his head up. If he does, I want to be on hand to spot him."

Tyler laughed. "Gene, if this evil genius of yours is as smart as you say, he's hardly likely to show himself."

"Probably not, but there's always a chance."

"Then you won't come to the ranch?"

"I'd sure like to, Thad, but I can't make it right now. I'm on a job and I don't want to quit until the job is done."

Tyler's voice cooled off considerably. "Suit yourself," he said.

"Sorry, Thad."

"It's all right. Another time, eh?"

"Yes."

"If I learn anything I'll let you know at once."

Good night."

Gene said, "Good night," and hung up the phone. The call gave him food for thought. He wondered why Tyler was so eager to have him visit the Double T ranch. He wondered why the capitalist became annoyed at his refusal to leave Timber City at this time and at Tyler's insistence that he was "barking up the wrong tree."

He recalled Tyler's laugh. It had sounded forced and unnatural. What was it he'd said that brought the laugh? Oh, yes, he'd said something about the unknown boss being worried—the likelihood that this individual might stick his head up. What was funny about that statement? Why had Tyler been so disparaging?

On an impulse Gene Autry grabbed the phone and asked for the long-distance operator. He asked to be connected with the lumber camp on the Chicapoo River. He held the phone, waiting as instructed. Then the operator informed him that there was no telephone service available to that particular camp. "Thanks," Gene said with a tight smile. "Thanks a lot!"

He rose and pulled open the drawer of the dresser. He removed his few articles of wearing apparel and tossed them on the bed. From the closet he took his saddlebags. In less than five minutes he was packed and ready for travel. He glanced at his

watch.

"Nine o'clock," he muttered. "If the moon's bright enough to make the trail halfway decent, I'll be at Dipper Creek before midnight." He was about to leave the room when a soft tap sounded on the door.

"Who is it?" he called.

A low voice came from beyond the door. "Gene Autry," the voice said, "I've got to see you right away. Let me in."

Gene opened the door and stood to one side. A man of medium height and weight came in. He wore nondescript clothes and had an expressionless face—the face of a poker player or a man who was without emotion. The stranger closed the door and said, "I've got something to show you, Autry."

Gene said, "Make it fast. I'm in a hurry."

"Leaving town?" the other said, glancing at the packed bags on the bed.

"Yes. What have you to show me? Who are you?"

"It don't matter who I am," the poker-faced man said as he reached beneath his coat. "What I've got to show you is this!" His hand came out, holding a snub-nosed gun. It pointed straight at Gene Autry's heart.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

GENE RIDES AGAIN

Gene Autry's guns were in their holsters. The holsters were on the gunbelt and the gunbelt, instead of being buckled around Gene's waist, lay on the bed. Gene glanced at it, calculating the distance from where he stood.

"Too far away, ain't it?" muttered the armed caller. "Don't try to grab it because I'd have three shots in you before you reached the bed."

"How many shots do you expect to put in me if I don't make a play to get my guns?" asked Gene in a conversational tone of voice.

"That all depends."

"What do you want?"

"You're goin' for a little walk with me."

Gene shook his head slowly. "Sorry," he said. "But I can't make it tonight. I've got other plans."

"Your other plans'll have to wait."

"Did the boss send you to get me?"

A slow, humorless smile came over the face of the other. "I've got no information to give you," he said.

"I haven't seen you around town," Gene went on. "You must be a newcomer. When did you arrive?"

"Let's get started on that walk." The stranger stepped to one side. "You go out the door first," he said. "Walk down the back stairs and go out the back door. If you make any noise I'll let you have it."

Gene remained where he stood. "I like to know where I'm going before I start out," he said. "I also like to know when I'll be back."

"Maybe you won't come back. Now get going."

"If you're planning to shoot me," Gene said, "I think you'd better do it here. The noise will attract attention and Sheriff Lawson will be here on the double. You won't have much chance of getting away with it. Not nearly as much as you'd have if I went to a more private place with you."

"Smart, eh?" sneered the gunman.

"No," said Gene shaking his head. "Not exactly smart. You see, I don't like murderers. If you're going to drill me, I want to be reasonably sure you'll not get away with it. Now, if you were sent to gun me, go ahead and squeeze the trigger."

Gene had no intention of letting the visitor do any such thing. He was talking to fill time while he made a rapid calculation of the situation. He knew that the cool, low-voiced man was no novice at this business. The man was an experienced gunman and, as such, quite unlikely to squeeze the trigger involuntarily.

"Look, pal," the gunman said, "I'm not going to get nailed by any of these small town lawmen, see? I've got a job to do an' I intend to do it. Now you can come with me nice an' quiet, or I'll use other plans I got ready."

"Let's hear about those other plans," Gene said with interest. "They might be more interesting than a walk with you."

"They'll be a lot more lively," threatened the other.

Gene took one step backward. He did it so naturally and casually that it went unnoticed. He stepped from the rug that lay beside the bed to the bare floor. Then his movements came lightning-fast: he ducked low, reaching for the edge of the rug. He expected to hear the roar of a gun but none came. Instead, the gunman cried, "Can that! I—"

Gene gave the rug a mighty jerk. The feet of the visitor shot out from beneath him. As he crashed to the floor, Gene was upon him. He grabbed the gun with one hand, gripping it around the cylinder so it couldn't turn; the gun could not be fired.

He put the heel of his other hand against the gunman's chin and pushed hard. There was a thud as the man's head smacked the hard floor. Gene kneeled on the chest of the partially stunned man. He wrenched the gun free, then leaped to his feet.

It had all happened in the space of a few seconds.

Before the gunman realized what was happening, he found himself flat on his back, disarmed, and dazed from a hard blow on the back of the head. But his troubles didn't stop there: Gene hauled him to his feet, measured the distance and sent a short but stunning blow straight to the point of the chin. The man would have fallen, but Gene caught him and eased him to the bed. It took but a few moments to tie the man's hands and feet with strips torn from the bed sheets.

"I'm sorry," Gene said, "but I've got to gag you too. You may have a few pals hanging around. Open your mouth."

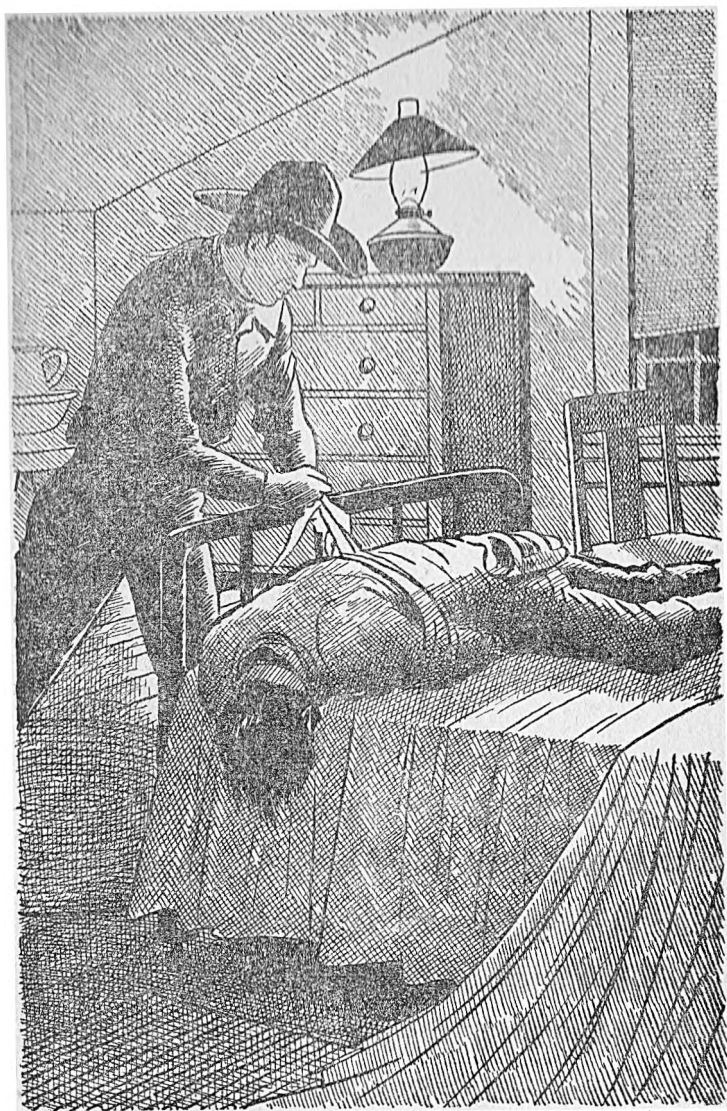
The would-be killer clamped his mouth shut and glared at Gene Autry.

"I said open your mouth," Gene snapped.

The other shook his head. Gene placed a thumb and index finger at the sides of the fellow's mouth and applied pressure in just the right place. When the man's mouth opened, he stuffed in a wadded piece of sheeting. He tied this in place and then stepped back.

"I'll send someone to see about making you more comfortable," he promised. Then he strapped on his gunbelt, picked up his saddlebags, and left the room.

On his way out of the hotel, Gene paused at the small desk in the lobby. A sleepy clerk looked up.



Gene Tied the Man's Hands and Feet

"Goin' out?" he asked.

Gene smiled and said, "For a little while." He glanced at the big notebook that served as a register. "Had any new arrivals?" he asked.

"Gent came in a couple of hours ago."

Gene noticed the new name on the register. "John Smith?" he said.

The clerk nodded. "From San Francisco."

"Did he have any phone calls?"

"None that I know of. I think he made a call, but I don't know of any that came in for him."

"Who'd he call?"

"I dunno. He didn't call from his room. He called from that phone over there." The clerk pointed to a phone booth in a corner of the lobby.

Gene said, "Thanks," and left the desk. He went into the booth and closed the door behind him. He spent several minutes trying to learn what calls had been made from that particular telephone, but his efforts were unsuccessful. The operator had just come on duty and no record was kept of the calls that went through the small exchange. Gene asked for the long-distance operator. A new voice came on the line. The girl was sorry, but she couldn't help him. Finally he gave up. He left the hotel.

It was good to be in the saddle, riding Champ across the moonlit mountains. The week in town

had been a trying one for Gene Autry. He was glad to be alone—apart from all the scheming and conniving that had been going on. Champ seemed equally glad to be on the trail. The big horse had a spring in his stride and an alert tilt to his ears. He wanted to run and it was hard for Gene to hold him to a pace that wouldn't exhaust him before Dipper Creek was reached.

Gene wanted to save his horse's strength. He didn't know what might happen when he reached the lumber camp, but he was sure of one thing. Something was going to happen! The attempt on his life had proved that he was nearer the end of his manhunt than he had supposed. The boss, whoever he might be, was worried!

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

ALLIES

The Dipper Creek camp was silent when Gene Autry rode up the hill alongside the flume, but there was a light burning in the office. Gene dismounted and went inside.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Brady. "You scared me out of a year's growth. What're you doing here, Autry? It's nearly midnight."

"I came to have a talk with you, Brady," Gene Autry replied.

"Still on the same subject?"

Gene nodded as he closed the door.

"You still think there's something crooked about the redwood industry?"

"What do you think about it, Brady?"

Brady shrugged his shoulders. "As far as I'm concerned," he said, "I'm just workin' on a job. I'm paid to see that this camp is run right and that we get out the timber as fast as possible. As long as my pay comes through regularly, I'm not interested in anything else."

Gene lifted his eyebrows in surprise. "You've changed since a week ago," he said.

"How's that?"

"When we had a showdown with Smythe, you said you didn't want any part of the crooked operations that had been going on here."

"Oh that's all straightened out now. Joe Turner got paid off and Smythe is dead. That whole deal's a closed book."

"Then you feel that the corporation that now owns this place is on the level?"

"As far as I know, it is. Have you any reason to think otherwise?"

Gene nodded and said, "I have."

"How's that?"

"The corporation is a dummy."

Brady closed the records on which he'd been working and placed them in the lower drawer of his desk. He closed and locked the drawer before he spoke. "You say the corporation is a dummy. What do you mean?"

"It's one of a number of similar corporations and they're all under the head of one man. It's a redwood monopoly."

"That's about the same as you told me once before," said Brady. "Have you got any proof to back what you say?"

"I came here," Gene said, "to get proof."

"How?"

Gene sat down in a chair facing the camp boss. "Brady," he said, "you spent quite a bit of time with

those men who came to Timber City to take care of things when Smythe died."

Brady nodded.

"What did those men tell you?"

"Nothing very much. They just told me to repair the flume and get the men back on the job. That's what I've been doing."

"They told you to report to someone, didn't they?"

"I'm to report to one of the men who was here."

"Where?"

"The office of the Dipper Creek Corporation in San Francisco."

"What's the name of the man?"

"King," replied Boss Brady promptly. "Henry King."

This was no help to Gene. He had already met Henry King. He knew that King was merely a go-between. He wasn't the man on top.

"Why're you asking me all these questions, Autry?" inquired Brady. "What made you think I could help you?"

"I'll tell you," replied Gene. "In every case that I've run across so far, one of the men in the camp was in direct contact with the big boss. Danahy and Zachery knew who he was. So did Disbro."

"They were in the Chicapoo River camp, weren't they?"

Gene nodded.

"You sure they knew the big boss?"

"Quite sure. So did J. Middleton Smythe."

"So you figured that I would've been told his name when Smythe passed out of the picture. Is that it?"

"I hoped that was the case, and I hoped that you'd play on my side."

Brady smiled and said, "I'm sorry, Autry. I'd do it if I could."

The big lumberman was disarmingly frank. Gene studied his face for a moment and then said, "Yes, Brady, I think you would. Maybe you can help."

"Not by anything I know."

Gene shook his head and said, "Maybe you can help in a different way."

"How?"

"A couple of hours ago, just before I left Timber City, a stranger came into my bedroom in the hotel and pulled a gun on me."

Brady let out a low whistle of surprise.

"He wanted me to take a walk so he could shoot me without bringing the whole town down on him."

"How'd you get away?"

"It wasn't hard. I had a lucky break," Gene said modestly.

"Where is he now?"

"I tied and gagged him, then told Sheriff Lawson

where he was. The sheriff will hold him in jail until I get back to town. Then we'll see if the man will talk."

"You'd have gotten further by staying in town and questioning him than you'll get here."

Gene said, "I doubt it. He wasn't the squealer type. I don't think anything will loosen his tongue."

"Then what are you going to do?"

"Here's the point," said Gene. "The leader of the monopoly is worried. He's already made one play to get me. He'll make another. If I'm here, he'll send someone to try to get me."

"Who knows you came here?"

"I didn't make any secret of where I was going."

Brady looked at Gene questioningly. "I don't get it," he said. "You still haven't said why you came here."

"Because you'll know any stranger that comes into the camp. I said you might be able to help me. Well, here's how you can do it. Keep your eyes open and tell any men you can trust to do the same."

Brady nodded.

"If we can catch someone trying to gun me, it may lead us to the boss."

"If you think it'll help any, I'll do what you say," agreed the head of the camp.

"Got a place where I can sleep?"

"How about Joe Turner's cabin?"

"No one using it?"

Brady said, "Nope. It's empty."

"That'll be first rate."

"I'll go down the hill with you," offered Brady.
"I'll take a few blankets from my shack."

"I won't need them. I've plenty of blankets with me."

"Grub?"

"I'll be in the bunkhouse at breakfast time."

"How about some guards? D'you think I'd better delegate a couple of the boys to guard you?"

"Not tonight, Brady. I don't think the boss'll be able to work that fast."

"Whatever you say, Autry. I'll take orders from you."

Gene smiled and said, "I was sure I could count on you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A KILLER STRIKES

Boss Brady summoned three of his foremen to a meeting while the rest of the lumber camp was at breakfast. The three sat in the office with expressions of curiosity on their faces. Hawk Ingalls lighted a cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. He offered the pack to Whitey Snow and Jack Riordan, both of whom declined.

"I can't smoke before breakfast," grumbled Whitey. "This must be downright important to come ahead of a meal."

"Where is the boss?" asked Riordan.

"I dunno. He said he'd be along in a few minutes," replied the man whose extremely light hair gave him his nickname.

"Did he say anythin' about eatin', Whitey?" asked the lanky man with a lean, long-nosed face.

"Not a word, Hawk."

"Here he comes now," put in Riordan as he saw Brady approach the open door.

"I hope he makes this fast," Hawk muttered.

Brady entered the room and closed the door. He faced the questioning faces, then sat down in the swivel chair at his desk.

"Boys," he began, "I know you ain't in a good mood before you get your breakfast, so I'll make this short an' to the point. We had company last night about midnight."

"Who?" asked the Hawk.

"Gene Autry."

"So that's who it was. I heard his horse. He woke me up."

"What's he doin' around here now?" demanded Whitey. "Is he goin' to try something else an' put another kink in our lumberin'?"

Brady grinned and said, "Nothing like that, Whitey."

"Then why is he here?"

"Why," put in Hawk, "does he pick the middle of the night to pay us a call?"

"Where is he?" asked Riordan.

"He spent the night in Joe Turner's cabin by the creek. Now if you boys'll keep your traps shut for a few minutes, I'll tell you the whole story in as few words as possible. You can save a lot of time by just keepin' still an' listenin'!"

The trio nodded.

"The point is just this," said Brady. "Last night in Timber City someone made a try to kill Autry."

Riordan, grinning, said, "That was downright careless. Is the critter that tried it in jail or at the coroner's place?"

"In jail."

"Why'd he do it? Was he tired of bein' a free man?"

"Gene says that he's getting closer to the head man of the redwood monopoly all the time. He figures the critter, whoever he is, is worried and wants to cut him down."

"Why'd he come here?" Hawk asked.

"He figures that this gunslinger was sent by the big boss. He figures that there'll be another man sent to get him. And if that one fails, there'll be another. The boss ain't the kind to quit when he makes up his mind to do something. Gene reasoned that strangers come into Timber City every day or so. There'd be no way to tell if a new arrival was in town on straight, honest business, or on a murder mission. Now here, it's different."

"How's that?"

"If any stranger shows up here, it'll be a lot easier to keep an eye on him. Gene thinks that the second would-be killer will learn that he came here to the camp, and come here after him."

"That," said Jack Riordan, "seems to me like sound reasoning."

Brady nodded and said, "It is!"

"Where do we come in?" Hawk asked.

"I've called the three of you together because I know that all three of you can be trusted. I'm goin'

to ask you to help me and Autry."

There were nods of agreement as Brady paused and looked at his subordinates. "Good!" the manager said. "I knew I could count on you."

"What're we to do?"

"If any newcomers show up and ask for work, put 'em on the job. Don't let 'em know that you suspect anything. Put 'em to work, but keep a sharp watch on 'em. If anyone shows up, we'll make arrangements to have the critter shadowed twenty-four hours a day. Y'see, we want to catch the gunslinger with the goods. I don't mean that he's to get Autry. But he's to be allowed to make his play! I want to get enough evidence to hang the polecat! Then, maybe, Gene can make him tell who sent him on the job. Is that clear?"

"Sure," said Whitey. Riordan nodded grimly. Hawk Ingalls dropped his cigarette and ground it into the floor with his heel. "There's just one thing, Brady," he said.

"Well?"

"Autry is out to smash the redwood syndicate. Ain't that right?"

"Yes."

"You're askin' us to help him smash it?"

"That's right, Hawk."

"Well I'd like to know this! Who's payin' our salaries? Ain't it the syndicate that's payin' us? Why

should we bite the hand that's feedin' us?"

"That's a good question, Hawk, and I think I can answer it to your satisfaction. You're being paid the regular salary for a man who does your work, aren't you?"

"Yeah."

"Nothing extra?"

Hawk shook his head.

"The way I look at it is this," Brady went on. "We're workin' for the Dipper Creek Corporation. We're doin' honest work for honest pay. We're not bein' paid anything extra to get mixed up in a lot of schemin' an' double-dealin' like Smythe was mixed up in. I'll do my job the best I know how, but if I've got to turn crooked or help a pack of crooks—or one big crook—that's a different proposition. I'm not sayin' that I'd turn crooked. I'm just sayin' that no one's made me any proposition to do so. If they did, I don't know what my answer'd be. Right now, I'm on the side of the law and that's the side Gene Autry's on. Does that let you know where I stand?"

Two of the three men nodded. Hawk scratched his ear reflectively and after a pause said, "O.K., Brady. I'll go along with your plans."

Brady said, "Thanks."

"Who guarded Autry last night?" asked Whitey. "Was he in that shack down there alone from the

time he got to camp?"

"Yes. He told me that the news of his comin' here wouldn't get around before this morning. He figured that there wouldn't be any moves made until sometime today—or maybe tonight. Now you boys better grab some breakfast. We've got a busy day. Remember to be on the lookout for visitors in this camp. Any one of them might be here to kill Gene Autry."

At that moment there was a rap on the door. Riordan chuckled and said, "Maybe that's the visitor you're speakin' about."

Brady called, "Come in."

It was Sheriff Lawson who walked into the room. His face was stern and set in deep lines of frowning. "Sheriff!" exclaimed Brady. "What're you doin' here?"

The lawman looked at Brady, then at each of the others in turn, without speaking. His flinty eyes met those of Boss Brady. "Special meeting?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why?" demanded the lawman shortly.

"We're just layin' plans to help Gene Autry."

"I just came from Joe Turner's cabin," Lawson said.

"That's where Gene spent the night."

"I know it."

"He figured that there might be someone comin'

here to get him. Me and these three boys were makin' plans to trap the killer."

"Whatever your plans are, Brady, you can forget them!" Something in the sheriff's tone did more than his words to freeze an expression of wonder on the faces of the men in the room.

After a pause, Sheriff Lawson spoke again. "The killer," he said, "struck sometime during the night!"

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE DEATH WATCH

"Hold on!" Brady exclaimed when Sheriff Lawson made the startling announcement. "No killer could've got to Gene Autry last night! I'd have heard it, I'm a light sleeper."

"It's a long ways from here to the bottom of the hill where Turner's shack's located," the sheriff said.

"If there'd been any gunshots down there, I'd have heard 'em," declared Hawk Ingalls.

"I didn't say there was a gunshot," replied the sheriff calmly. "The killer used a knife."

Brady looked at the sheriff with a trace of suspicion on his face. "You just found him now?" he asked.

"Yes."

"When did you get here?"

"Little while ago."

"You could've knifed him yourself, couldn't you?"

Lawson said, "Why in blazes would I want to kill Gene Autry?"

"For the same reason anyone else would get him. For the cash that'd be paid."

"That'll do, Brady!" snapped the sheriff. "In the first place, I don't like to be charged with things

like murder. In the second place, I came here with two deputies and they've been right with me every minute."

"Oh," muttered Brady. He paused, then said, "Any idea who might've done it?"

"Have you seen any strangers around here?" countered the sheriff.

"No." Brady sighed deeply. "I'm sure sorry to hear about Autry," he said. "I suggested that we have someone posted to guard him, but he didn't think it'd be necessary last night."

"This organization is workin' mighty fast now," the sheriff said. "Things may come to a head real soon."

Brady said, "Sheriff, I didn't mean to accuse you of Autry's murder. I—I guess the news sort of hit me between the eyes."

"I reckon so," Lawson replied.

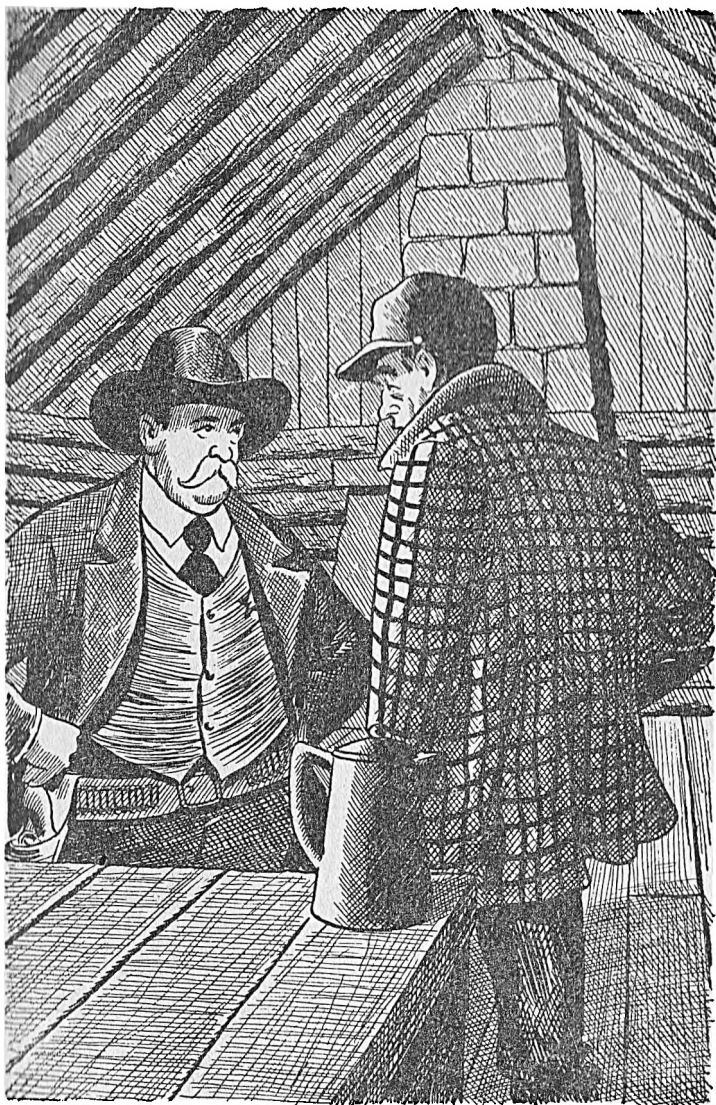
"What are you going to do now?"

"The deputies are fixin' Gene up on his horse. They'll take him in to Timber City."

"I'll go with you."

"There's nothing you can do, Brady. You might as well stay here and run the camp."

"I can make arrangements for things to go along for a few days without me," the boss said. "Autry came to me for help. I—I feel that I'm to blame for what happened. The least I can do is go to Timber



"Have You Seen Any Strangers Around Here?"

City for—for his funeral.”

“I don’t know as he’ll be buried there.”

“I’ll go anyway.”

“Suit yourself.”

Hawk Ingalls spoke. “Is there any clue to the killer?” he inquired.

“Haven’t found anything yet. There were so many footprints around the shack that I’ve got no way of telling which ones were made by the knife toter. All I’ve got is the knife.”

“Any fingerprints on it?” Brady asked.

“I don’t think so, but I’ve got it wrapped in my handkerchief to protect ’em if there are any.”

“What can I do to help find that murderin’ rat?” asked the boss of the camp.

“Well, you can call everyone together. I want to question them and see if I can find anyone that went for a walk during the night.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

“But what about—about Gene’s body?”

“The boys will go on ahead of me. They’ll take him to town. I’ll stay around here until I’ve made what investigation I can.”

The sheriff’s investigation took all morning and half of the afternoon. Everyone in camp was assembled. Brady explained the purpose of the meeting, then Lawson asked questions. When he finished, he

summoned each man into the office individually and asked more questions.

Then, accompanied by Brady, Ingalls, and Rior-dan, he went to the foot of the hill and studied the ground around Joe Turner's shack with painstaking care. He went over every foot of ground—examined each footprint and made countless notes in a small notebook. Then he borrowed a small screwdriver and removed the latch from the cabin door. He wrapped this in a blue bandanna, being careful not to add his fingerprints to any that might be on the latch, and put it into his saddlebag.

Inside the cabin, while Brady and the others watched, the lawman took Gene Autry's blankets from the built-in bunk. He held them up so the others could see the one-inch slit made by a sharp knife. Then he made them into a tight roll and tied them to his saddle.

The trip to town was made in silence. Neither Brady nor the sheriff had anything to say. It was dark when they rode up the main street.

"I don't know why you came along, Brady," the sheriff said. "There isn't a blamed thing you can do."

"I know," sighed Brady. "But I wanted to come. I—I'd like to see Gene—"

"I guess that can be arranged." The two reined up at the coroner's place. "Wait here a minute," Lawson said as he dismounted. "I'll see if the coro-

ner is inside."

Brady tied his horse to the hitching post, then filled and lighted his pipe. Before he'd smoked half a bowlful of tobacco, the sheriff opened the door and told him to come in. He tapped out the coals and stuck the pipe in the top of his boot.

The front of the coroner's office was a small room that held a desk, a few large potted ferns, and a few bent-wood chairs. Lawson motioned for Brady to follow through a door in the rear of the room. The second room was dimly lighted. The only illumination came from a small lamp in the far corner.

"There he is," the sheriff said, motioning to a still form on a low pallet.

Gene lay with his hands folded across his chest. They looked soft and white—quite incapable of dealing out the smashing blows that many a man would remember to his dying day. They didn't look like the hands of the man who manipulated the heavy, ivory-handled Colts that lay on a near-by table.

Brady stared at the man whose deeds of valor had made his name a household word from coast to coast. "He—he sure looks natural, don't he?" Brady said.

"Let's get out of here," said Lawson.

Brady was ready to leave. "Gosh," he said, when the two were once more in front of the building. "I

can't believe that Gene Autry is dead! I—I half expected him to jump up from that cot and grab his guns and start goin' after his own killer! He looked as if he could do it."

"What're you goin' to do now, Brady?" the sheriff asked.

"I need a drink. I'm goin' to go get it. Join me?"

"No, thanks, I'm goin' home. I got precious little sleep last night. I started out for Dipper Creek at four a.m. Where you goin' to stay, Brady?"

"I'll get a room at the hotel."

The sheriff nodded and said, "Drop around at my office in the morning."

Brady said he would, then the two parted company. The sheriff mounted and rode toward his home. Brady walked across the street to the nearest saloon.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

BACK FROM THE BEYOND

Brady didn't stay long in the saloon. He was in a room in the Timber City Hotel by ten o'clock. He locked the door carefully, then sat down before the telephone, picked up the receiver, and asked for long distance. It took several minutes for the connection to be made. Presently a voice responded to the ringing.

"Is this the Double T ranch?" asked Brady.

"It is," someone said.

"I want to talk to Thaddeus Tyler."

"Who's calling?"

"Brady."

"This is Tyler speaking."

"Oh, hello, Mr. Tyler. I guess you know who I am, don't you? The men who were here told me that you'd know about me."

"What do you want?" asked the man at the other end of the line.

"I thought I'd let you know—Gene Autry is dead."

There was a pause. Then Tyler said, "How did it happen?"

"He came to the Dipper Creek camp last night. He told me that someone had made a play for him

and failed. He had a scheme to trap the next one that tried to get him, but the killer worked too fast. He stuck him with a knife during the night."

"I see. I'm sorry that Autry had to die. He was a fine man."

"Yeah, that's right," agreed Brady.

"I tried to get him off the case by inviting him to my ranch, but he was stubborn. Now he's dead. Are there any clues to the killer? Is anyone suspected?"

"Not yet."

"Somebody will have to be charged with the murder. The law won't rest unless someone hangs for killing Gene Autry."

"That's what I was thinking."

"Is there anyone in camp who is without an alibi?"

"Hardly any of the men have alibis," replied Brady. "They were all sleepin' at the time."

"In that case it won't be hard to pin the crime on someone."

"Sheriff Lawson's pretty shrewd."

"I'll send a special investigator to the camp," promised Thaddeus Tyler. "He will confer with you. I'm sure the murder can be pinned on someone—then the law will be appeased."

"O.K."

"Anything else to report?"

"No, Mr. Tyler. That's all. Good night."

Brady hung up the phone with a hard smile. "It sure pays to work for a man like that," he mused. "He don't leave anything to chance. He's plenty smart. He's smart enough to know that Autry's killer has to be caught—so he'll see that someone is caught." Brady chuckled. "Sort of tough on the gent that's framed," he thought. His reverie was broken by a rap on the door. It startled him. He made a move in the direction of his gun, then laughed at his nervousness and moved to the door. "Who is it?" he asked.

"Open up," called a familiar voice. "It's me—Lawson. I want to speak to you."

"Thought he'd gone to bed," Brady grumbled as he unlocked and opened the door. "What's up?" he asked. "What're you doing here?"

"Got a little job to do," the sheriff said casually. "I came here to do it."

"What is—" Brady's speech hung suspended and his mouth remained open. He stared as if at a ghost. Standing in the corridor in back of Sheriff Lawson, wearing a gunbelt and two ivory-handled pistols, stood Gene Autry!

"We want you," the sheriff said, "for the attempted murder of Gene Autry! It's my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used against you! Are you comin' peaceable, or will you save the trouble of a trial by goin' for a gun an' givin' me an ex-

cuse to shoot?"

Brady finally found his voice. "Wait a minute," he cried. "There's a mistake somewhere. I—"

"You bet there's a mistake," retorted the lawman, "and you made it!" He grabbed Brady's arm and hauled him into the room. Gene Autry followed and closed the door.

"Brady," Gene said, "we've got you cold! When you came down to Joe Turner's shack during the night, the sheriff and two deputies were there with me. All four of us saw you turn a flashlight on the bunk, then stab with your knife."

"B—But I—that is—I didn't mean—" Brady groped for something to say. "This can't be true," he stammered. "I—I'm dreamin' it. I—I saw you dead!"

"You thought I was dead and that's just what you were supposed to think! As a matter of fact, you stabbed a dummy in that bunk last night."

"A—A d-dummy?"

"Yes. You see, when a man like the syndicate boss gets a formula that works, he generally sticks to that formula. In this particular case, the boss always had one or two men who reported directly to him. First it was Danahy and Zachery. Then, in this vicinity, it was J. Middleton Smythe. When Smythe died, I figured he'd appoint someone else. You were the logical one for the appointment. When I saw how your attitude had changed from a week ago, I was

pretty sure that those men who set up the new corporation had told you who to report to.

"Last night Thaddeus Tyler tried to persuade me to quit this case. When I refused, a man came into the room and tried to kill me. I don't know what the arrangements were. Possibly the man had orders to call on me at a certain time unless he received instructions to the contrary. Or the man may have phoned Tyler for final instructions. We can learn more when the law subpoenas the records of the telephone company."

"You bet we can," the sheriff said. "I'll bet the records of the phone company'll show that there's been a lot of calls between here an' the Double T ranch. Tyler must've been in touch with Smythe often."

Brady seemed stunned by the sudden change in events. A moment ago he had been riding on the crest of a wave. He had felt that his position was secure with the one man capable of smashing the organization lying dead in the coroner's parlor. He had felt that his achievement in killing Gene Autry would put him in high favor with Thaddeus Tyler. But now all that was changed. He had failed in the attempt to kill Gene. He had given Tyler a false report. He looked at the sheriff.

"Y—You say—you were at the camp last night?" he queried.

"I sure was," nodded the lawman.

Gene said, "When the first attempt to kill me failed, I called on Sheriff Lawson and we made a few plans. I told him that I was quite sure that you were closer to the boss than you'd been while Smythe was alive. So we went to the camp."

"Me and my deputies waited near Turner's shack while Gene went to talk to you," the sheriff explained.

"I let you know that orders to 'get' me had gone out. I showed you a way to put yourself in solid with the big boss by getting me out of the way. As events turned out, you walked right into the trap."

Sheriff Lawson chuckled. "You sure looked mighty foolish," he said. "Gene was right with me and the deputies. We watched you sneak up on the cabin with the knife in one hand and the flashlight in the other. We saw the whole performance, includin' the way you washed your hands in the creek before you started up the hill!"

"I—I don't see why you—you had to play dead," Brady said to Gene Autry in a thin, faltering voice. "Th-that was a dirty trick. I—I don't see why you had to do it."

Gene said, "It wasn't enough just to get you, Brady. The law isn't satisfied with the small fry in this syndicate. The law is after the head man! We wanted the man who gave the orders to Danahy and Zachery—to Disbro and to J. Middleton Smythe

—the man who sent a killer to shoot me. By letting you think you'd accomplished something, we got what we were after! When you telephoned Thad Tyler to report that you'd killed me, the sheriff and I were at the switchboard in the hotel lobby. We got the name of the head man!"

The look of bewilderment in Brady's face gave way to one of terror. The full import of what he had done came to him with stunning force.

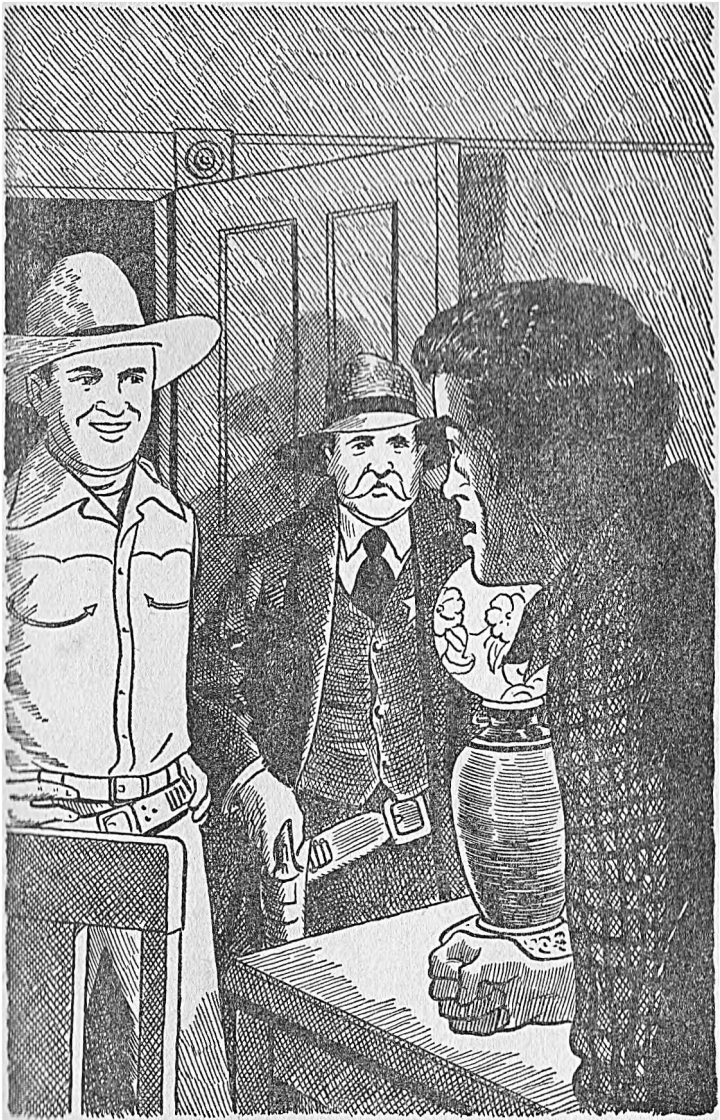
Gene saw the change in Brady's expression and correctly interpreted it. "You're going to be in a tight spot, aren't you?" he said. "I wonder what Tyler will do when he learns that I'm not dead?"

Brady gasped. "I—I told him y-you were d-dead—"

"Yes. I know you did! You told him that you'd killed me. Right at this moment he's in that big house of his on the Double T ranch, gloating over the fact that I'm out of the way. When he learns that you lied to him, he's going to be pretty sore about it."

Brady groaned audibly. Sheriff Lawson picked up the cue and carried on in the vein that Gene had started. "I'll bet he'll be boilin' mad," he muttered. "Mad enough to do doggoned near anything. Especially when he learns that you were fool enough to put a call through the hotel switchboard."

"Thad Tyler has no time for men who fail," Gene said.



Brady Was Terrified

"Or," added the sheriff, "men who lie to him—"

"I didn't mean to lie," whimpered Brady, as if to excuse himself. "I didn't mean to lie!"

The sheriff shook his head sadly. "I'd hate to be in your shoes, Brady," he said. "J. Middleton Smythe knew what to expect. He knew what Tyler'd do to him, an' he preferred dyin' by poison to facin' what that man'd hand out."

Brady leaped to his feet so unexpectedly that both Gene and the sheriff were taken by surprise. "You ain't got me yet," he cried as he leaped at Lawson.

Brady thrust his left hand out in front, pushing his palm against the lawman's face. The chair tipped backward. Lawson instinctively threw up his hands to protect himself. Brady snatched his gun in a frenzied effort to escape. It was a desperate move—one that was so completely unlooked for that it very nearly succeeded.

There was a crash as the sheriff and the chair on which he sat spilled to the floor. Brady swung the gun toward Gene Autry and pulled the trigger. Orange flame lashed out and the room fairly shook from the explosion.

The whole thing, from the time of Brady's first move to the firing of the sheriff's gun, took place in less than two seconds. There was barely time enough for Gene to grasp what was happening. He saw Brady leap to his feet and the next instant he heard

a gun roar almost in his face. The bullet fanned his cheek as Gene dropped to the floor.

He grabbed Brady by the ankles, one in each hand, and gave a mighty jerk. The lumberman's feet shot out from beneath him. He crashed to the floor as he squeezed the trigger a second time.

Pieces of plaster showered down as the bullet thudded into the ceiling. Then Gene's gun was out. He didn't fire. He used the weapon as a club, bringing the barrel down on Brady's forearm. Brady's hand went limp. The sheriff scooped up his gun as it fell from Brady's limp fingers. "Crazy fool," he growled. "I'll fix him for that."

"Stay back," cried Gene. "I'll handle him."

He dropped his gun into the holster and grabbed Brady beneath the armpits. He jerked Brady to his feet and jammed his back against the nearest wall.

"The chips are down, Brady!" he said. "If you want to play it the hard way, I'll accommodate you."

Gasping, Brady said, "Y-You won't get me alive." He swung a blow with his left hand. It was a vicious blow but Gene ducked beneath it. When he came up, he jabbed a short hook into Brady's chin. Then he crossed with the other hand, clipping the powerful lumberman on the side of his jaw. Brady's head bounced to the side.

Gene stepped back. "Do you want some more?"

Brady shook his head and slumped to the floor.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THE TOP MAN

It was ten minutes before Gene Autry's applications of cold water to Brady's face and head brought the lumberman to full consciousness. In the meantime, the sheriff had met the hotel manager at the door and accounted for the gunfire and confusion.

"Brady," Gene said, "we can jail you for attempted murder. We've got an airtight case against you—but I'm more interested in Thad Tyler. You know that as long as that man's out of jail, he'll be dangerous to you. He'll get you, the same as he got many others. He'll send someone to deal with you. You know that, don't you?"

Brady nodded. "I—I know," he said in a low voice. "M-My life ain't worth a plugged nickel."

"That's where you're wrong! We're going to see that Tyler doesn't get you, but you've got to help us."

A look of interest came into Brady's face. "You mean to say you'll protect me from him?"

Gene said, "Yes, Brady. I've checked up on you. You've been a straight-shooter all your life. You've been a good lumberman and a fair man to work for. You've held good jobs and your work's been first rate. You made a mistake when you listened to the

syndicate representatives. They made dazzling promises and you fell for them. Isn't that true?"

Brady nodded. "I—I wish I'd never heard of that syndicate," he said bitterly. "I was all right until those men came to Timber City. They—they talked me into this thing. I didn't want tuh kill you, Autry, but they didn't give me any choice. They said that you had to be put out of the way. They told me if someone else didn't do it, I'd have to."

"What would they have done if you hadn't obeyed them?"

"Someone would've been killed. If it wasn't you, it would've been someone else, and I'd have been framed for it. Right now Tyler is all set to frame someone in the camp for your murder. When that outfit goes after someone," he said, "a man's got no chance. He can do what they want an' have the protection of the syndicate, or he can be blamed for all kinds of crimes an' take the rap for them."

"Are you willing to help us?" asked Gene.

Brady said, "I sure am! I'm sick of the whole rotten mess! Just tell me what to do."

"Talk. I want to know everything you can tell about Thaddeus Tyler."

"I can't tell you very much."

"What you tell will be the entering wedge, Brady. That's all the law needs! Once we get a toe hold on a case against Tyler, things will open up."

"I'll tell you all I know."

Brady talked for over half an hour while Gene Autry and the sheriff made careful notes of names, places, and events. Then Gene stepped to the telephone and called a man in another city.

"Do you," asked Gene when his connection had been established, "have a pencil and paper handy?"

"You bet I have," was the reply. "Have you discovered the identity of the head man of the monopoly?"

Gene said, "I have. The name of the man at the top is Thad Tyler."

An exclamatory whistle came over the wires. "That's going to take a carload of proof," the government official said. "Tyler's got power and he's got powerful men back of him. We can't touch him unless we can get an airtight case against him."

Gene said, "I think you'll get an airtight case. When you start picking up the other men in the syndicate, they'll fall all over themselves to turn state's evidence and save their own necks. Get ready and I'll give you the names."

The list of names that Gene gave over the telephone included many men of prominence. There were several men in high political positions, a bank president and his secretary, two corporation lawyers, and several men of minor importance. Gene didn't stop with these. He passed on the names of

men who might be called to testify as to the activities of the syndicate. He reported on the firing of Redwood Jackson's timber and the scheme that had nearly deprived old Joe Turner of everything he owned. And there were others who had been defrauded. The list was a long one and later, as the government investigation got under way, destined to grow much longer.

When Gene Autry finally hung up the receiver, he grinned at the expression of surprise that had grown upon the sheriff's face. "You sure gave him somethin' to start with," the lawman said.

"I had quite a bit of information that I picked up as I went along," explained Gene. "But none of it meant a thing until I had the name of the man on top. Now, I think there'll be fireworks!"

Gene's statement was prophetic. The exposé of the monopoly in redwood began with the arrest of Thaddeus Tyler. This came as a shocking surprise to the men who took their orders from the boss. In their eagerness to save themselves they played right into the hands of the government officials. They produced letters, top secret files, affidavits, and testimony that piled higher and higher. Each time a new arrest was made, there were new revelations.

The list of charges in the indictment against Tyler became longer and longer as the investigation pro-

gressed. Then the T-men moved into action with Tyler's income tax returns. Charges of tax fraud and evasion were added to the other charges.

The vast kingdom that Tyler had built proved to be founded on sand; when the investigation got under way, it fell apart. He was deserted by those upon whom he had depended, as rats will leave a sinking ship. Despite the man's extensive interests, he wasn't even solvent. When the final showdown came, he couldn't raise the staggering bail that a stern judge fixed. He sat alone in jail, but he never came to trial. The sudden collapse of all that he'd built up was more than Tyler's heart could stand. One day the guards found him dead on his cot.

Gene Autry was glad that Tyler's end came in that way. He remembered a little old lady—the mother of Thad Tyler. He knew that her burden would be lightened by being spared the ordeal of a trial that might have dragged on for months. Gene went to call on her the day after Thaddeus was found dead. She was living in the caretaker's house.

"Gene," she said, "I'm glad you came."

"I'm sorry things had to turn out like this," Gene said. "Is there anything that I can do to help you?"

Mrs. Tyler shook her head. "It may seem like an awful thing to say, but I feel as if there'd been a heavy load lifted off my shoulders. I knew that my

boy'd gone the wrong way. He'd gotten to feelin' that he was a king or somethin'. He wanted more an' more power. I didn't know where it would all end up. It ain't right for anyone to have the money and power that Thad had, unless he does good with it. Thad didn't do good. He used his money to make more money, and to get more power. I didn't know where or how it would all end." The old lady paused and smiled faintly. "Now," she said, "I know."

"I understand," said Gene. "But what about you? What are you going to do?"

"I'm goin' to be happy," the woman said. "I'm goin' to help run a lumber camp."

Gene looked at the old lady in surprise. "You are?" he said.

Mrs. Tyler said, "The camp on the Chicapoo River is goin' to be reorganized an' run as it should be run. A man named Redwood Jackson is goin' to be in charge and he's written me to ask if I'll go there an' help. He's got two fine, strappin' boys that'll be there with their wives, an' it'll be like old times, livin' in the redwood forests—" a dreamy look came into Mrs. Tyler's eyes "—livin' where men work with their muscles for a livin'—where I can hear the saws an' the shouts of 'Timber-r-r' an' smell the clean, sweet smell of the woods." She looked at Gene. "I wonder," she said, "how Redwood Jackson heard about me? Why should he write to me an' ask me to

go to his place as a sort of adviser?"

Gene grinned and said, "I guess someone who knew you must have told Redwood how valuable you'd be."

The little lady smiled and took Gene's hand between both her own. "Y'know," she said, "that's more'n my own son ever done for me."

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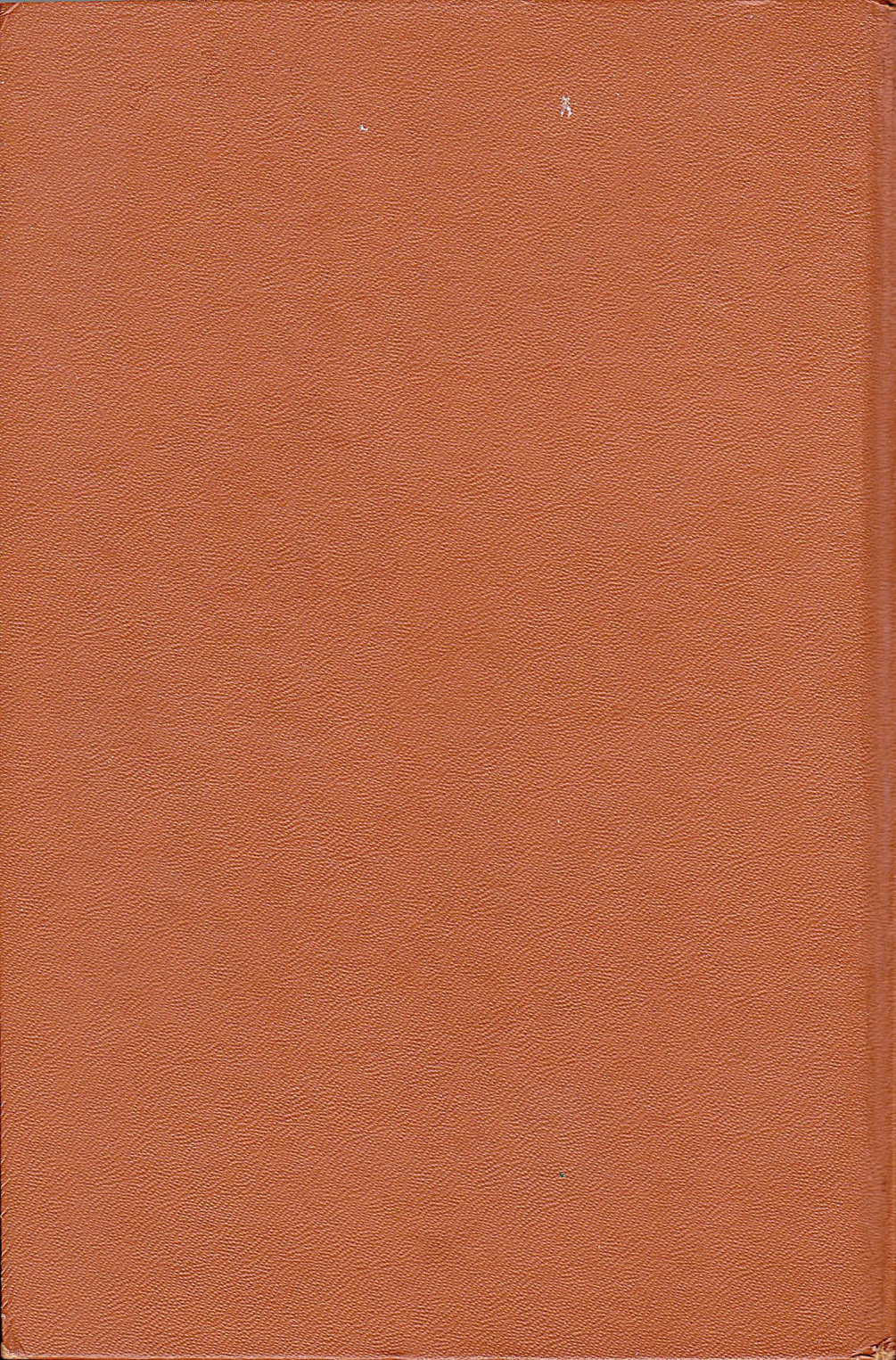
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